FUEL of FIRE

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IN SILVERHAMPTON MARKET-PLACE SHE WAS BURNT ALIVE.

Fuel of Fire

By

Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler

Author of "Concerning Isabel Carnaby," "A Double Thread," "The Farringdons," Etc.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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PROLOGUE.

"First by the King, and then by the State,
And thirdly by that which is thrice as great
As these, and a thousandfold stronger and higher,
Shall Baxendale Hall be made fuel of fire."

It fell upon a day (so the ancient chronicles tell us)—before men had discovered that Mershire was a land whose stones were of iron and her foundations of coal—that Guy, the eldest son of Sir Stephen de Baxendale, went out hunting in the merry greenwood which lay between Baxendale Hall and Silverhampton town. And because Guy was too young to take such heed to his own steps and the steps of his steed as an older and wiser huntsman would have done, the horse put his foot into a rabbit-hole, thereby bringing himself and his rider to the ground. In much fear and trembling the retainers picked up the unconscious form of their young master and bore him to Gorsty Hayes, a forester's lodge in the heart of the wood, which is still standing to this day. There he was nursed back to consciousness by Vivien of the Glade, the forester's fair daughter, much famed in those parts for her skill in discovering healing herbs, and distilling soothing potions from the same.

It was many a long day before Guy of Baxendale was sufficiently recovered to be taken home to the Hall; for his leg was broken and his whole body badly bruised. And when at last he did go back, he left his heart behind him in the safe keeping of Vivien of the Glade: for even in those far-off times Love flew where he listed and no man ordered his goings, just as he does unto this day, and will do so long as this round world of ours shall run its course in the light of the sun.

Then there was war in the house of Baxendale. Guy had made up his mind to wed the fair daughter of the forester; while Sir Stephen and Dame Alice, his wife, had made up their minds with equal firmness that no son of their noble name should mate with a daughter of the people.

Long before William the Norman planted his indomitable foot upon English soil, the Baxendales had taken up their abode in the heart of the Mershire forests, and there had builded themselves a stronghold against their enemies. It was rumoured that one of them had fought on the side of Ethelfleda, Queen of Mercia, in the great battle between the Dames and the Saxons; and that the queen had delighted to honour him for his bravery on that day of blood. Be that as it may, the family had long ruled over their own fair lands in the centre of the Mershire forests, and had accounted themselves as being made of different flesh and blood from the common people, which men are sadly prone to

do when they have handed down their lands from father to son for many generations; until God sees fit to teach them Himself that He is no respecter of persons.

Therefore, it was a bitter thing to Sir Stephen and Dame Alice, his wife, when their first-born son set his heart upon Vivien, the forester's daughter. But Guy clave to the woman and refused to let her go, for the which should all succeeding Baxendales honour him; as a man who is not ready to leave his father and mother in order to cleave to his wife is not the clay out of which the best husbands and fathers are fashioned by the hands of the great Potter.

While the battle was waging fierce and strong—Guy swearing that he should wed the girl whether or no, and his parents swearing that he should not—a rumour got wind in the neighbourhood (started, men said, in the first place by Dame Alice herself) that the healing skill of Vivien of the Glade had its origin in the sin of witchcraft. Then alas, and alas for Guy of Baxendale and his ill-fated love! The rumour grew apace, until women refused so much as to look at Vivien's fair face; and even brave men crossed themselves if they had to ride by Gorsty Hayes after nightfall. And at last it came to pass that the girl was seized by soldiers and carried to Baxendale Hall, where she was condemned by several worthy Justices of the Peace to be burnt alive at Silverhampton market-place, as a punishment for

her evil deeds, and a warning to any like-minded persons who might be tempted to follow in her unholy footsteps.

So in Silverhampton market-place she was burnt alive, close to the strange old Druidical pillar whereof no man knows the history even unto this day. And just as the fagots were beginning to crackle she broke through the rope that bound her right arm, and pointed with her forefinger to the thickly-wooded hill on the other side of the valley, where Baxendale Hall nestled among the trees—the home of the great family who had done her to death for the sole crime of being lowly-born. And as she pointed to their house she raised her voice and cursed them as they had cursed her:

> "First by the King, and then by the State,
> And thirdly by that which is thrice as great
> As these, and a thousandfold stronger and higher,
> Shall Baxendale Hall be made fuel of fire."

Then the tongues of flame leaped up and fawned upon her like dogs of war let loose by fiendish hands; higher and higher they leaped, until the voice of cursing faded into a shriek of agony, and then died away into the silence of the eternities. And the people stood round and gazed upon the awful sight, thanking God—in their blindness and ignorance—that they were not as this woman was; while the old church of St. Peter uplifted its ancient tower above their heads, an unheeded witness to Him Who would

fain have gathered them all under His wings as a hen gathereth her chickens, but they would not; and Who would fain have taught them—in this His temple made with hands—the things that belonged to their peace, but which as yet were hid from their eyes.

Thus perished Vivien of the Glade, because she had succeeded in winning the love of Guy of Baxendale. But her curse lived on, and was fulfilled to the letter.

As for Guy, he forgot his sorrow in the fierce joy of fighting in the Wars of the Roses, the love of war being stronger in some men than even the love of woman. Then late in life, when he was alike too old to fight or to love any more, he took to wife a well-born damsel, some thirty years younger than himself, who bore him a large family of sons and daughters. In a ripe but cheerless old age he was gathered to his fathers, and Hugh, his son, reigned in his stead. But until the day of his death Guy of Baxendale never again entered Silverhampton town. He turned on his heel and shook the dust of the place off his feet on the day when the woman he loved was martyred underneath the old stone pillar, in the very shadow of the church which brought—to those who had ears to hear it—the message of peace upon earth and goodwill towards men. And he never set foot therein again.

But his children and his grandchildren married in their own class and lived happily ever after—at least,

until they were removed to that strange world where rank and wealth count for less than nothing, and love and duty for so much. If they found it impossible to live happily in a world where it was accounted better to be a saint than a Baxendale, no one knows; but it is somewhat difficult for even a chronicler to imagine.

Nevertheless, because human nature is stronger than pride of birth or social ambition—is stronger, in fact, than anything else on earth except the grace of God (and sometimes for a while apparently even stronger than that)—it came to pass, when Henry the Eighth was king, that again a Baxendale lost his heart to a daughter of the people. Once more, as of old, his parents interfered between him and the soul that God had given him, for the sake of the glory of their ancient house. And because Richard Baxendale—like his ancestor Guy—swore that he would marry the girl he loved, though she was only Agnes Tyler, daughter of a wool-merchant in Silverhampton, Agnes was sent to the convent of Greyladies, and there compelled by her father to take the veil: for how could a plain Mercian wool-merchant defy the wishes of the great Sir Wilfred Baxendale?

So Agnes possessed her sweet soul in patience within the thick stone walls of Greyladies, and passed her time in praying for Richard Baxendale, that he might do honour to his knighthood on earth and finally obtain the heavenly crown which is promised to him that overcometh. There, year after year,

she watched the daffodils cover the earth, and she thought upon those golden streets through which Richard and she should one day walk together: and she saw the wild hyacinths carpet the woodlands, and thought upon the pavement of sapphire, before which Richard and she should one day kneel. She prayed also for his wife and his children; for her love was not of the earth earthy, and there was no thought of self to be found therein. As for the wool-merchant, her father, he commended himself in that he had killed two birds with one stone, so to speak, in pleasing God and Sir Wilfred equally, by taking his daughter from the one in order to give her to the Other: and he felt that he had thereby conferred an obligation upon both of these Powers which neither of them could lightly discharge. It is always so satisfactory to a man when he can serve God and Mammon at the same time! There was no doubt that the wool-merchant of Silverhampton was an excellent man of business; and there was also no doubt that two of the parties involved—namely, himself and Sir Wilfred—were completely satisfied with the arrangement. Whether the Third Power concerned in the transaction concurred in the approval manifested by the other two is a more doubtful matter, and one whereof the chronicler knows nothing: but Will Tyler himself knows all about it by this time, and probably realises at last the disadvantages of a divided service.

When Agnes was safely out of his reach, Richard

took to wife the Lady Anne, daughter of the Earl of Mershire; and by her had three fine sons and four fair daughters. But his heart was always in the convent of Greyladies, some five miles from Baxendale Hall.

It was when Sir Richard's hair was thinning and his beard was turning grey, that the Reformation altered the whole political aspect of England; and Henry the Eighth appropriated to himself the religious house of Greyladies, and all the properties appertaining thereto. The convent was sacked, and the nuns fled to Baxendale, taking with them as much treasure as they could carry; for Sir Richard, being but a simple English gentleman, could not understand how even kings should rise superior to the Eighth Commandment, and yet go unpunished.

The king's soldiers, in the king's name, commanded Sir Richard to give up the treasures of the convent, or else they would burn Baxendale Hall to the ground; but he laughed in their faces, and swore that the nuns who had fled to him for safety should find it there until his death.

Then the king's soldiers, in the king's name, set fire to the Hall. The Lady Anne and her children escaped; but Sir Richard stayed with the nuns whom he was defending, like the brave knight he was, and perished with them in the final crash.

Tradition says that just at the end—when all hope or chance of life was over, and death was waiting for them both—Sir Richard threw back the veil

which for so long had divided him from Agnes, and kissed her once more full upon the lips, as he had been wont to kiss her long ago in the merry greenwood between Baxendale Hall and Silverhampton. If this were so, no one saw it save the God Who made them man and woman before they were knight and nun, and therefore would not go back upon His Own handiwork: and their souls are in His keeping until this day.

Thus perished Sir Richard and the woman he had loved, and thus was fulfilled the first part of the curse of Vivien of the Glade.

A third time it came to pass—since history has a habit of repeating itself—that a Baxendale sought a low-born bride. The Hall had been rebuilt for close upon a century, when Walter Baxendale, one of the most loyal subjects of King Charles the Martyr, set his heart upon Charity Freemantle, a pretty Puritan maid. But now it was the lady's father who objected, not the swain's, for Walter had lost both his parents while he was yet a boy. Joshua Freemantle swore a great oath that none of his household should touch the accursed thing; whereby he meant that none of his pretty daughters should be joined in wedlock with a supporter of the royalist cause.

Again, as of yore, there were sweet stolen meetings in the woodlands lying west of Silverhampton town—meetings which turned the mossy paths into veritable highways of Paradise, and the sun-dappled

glades into fairyland itself: when the shouting of the captains was drowned for a while in the hush and the hum of the summer; and the sound of war could no longer be heard because of the murmur of lovers' vows and lovers' kisses.

Then came the battle of Worcester, and the triumph of the Parliamentary army; when Charles fled for safety to Boscobel, and there was hid in an oak-tree from his would-be murderers. Cromwell's men suspected that the fugitive monarch was in hiding at Baxendale Hall; and they commanded the master thereof to deliver into their hands the king to whom he had sworn allegiance; a thing which Walter Baxendale would not have done if he could, since he was a loyal knight and true, and could not if he would, as the king was not at Baxendale at all, but had ridden on to Boscobel.

But in the midst of the search for King Charles, Joshua Freemantle—one of Cromwell's most fanatical followers—came upon his daughter, Charity, in Baxendale Wood, folded in the arms of her devoted cavalier, who had just come back to her alive and unhurt from the field of Worcester. In a moment of frenzy, Freemantle fired at the man he hated, as men never hate save in the throes of civil warfare; but Charity, seeing what was coming, flung herself between her father and her lover, and so was slain in her lover's stead.

Then Sir Walter and Freemantle engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle, the one being inspired by the

love of woman and the other by the love of religion —two of the strongest forces that ever impelled men to shed blood like water.

For many minutes the deadly combat lasted, first the one seeming to get the upper hand, and then the other. But Baxendale's heart was broken, and it is hard work fighting with a broken heart; so it came to pass that the fanatic proved too strong for the knight and finally overthrew him, running him straight through the body with his sword. So Walter and his love lay dead together in the woodland where they had so often plighted their vows; and who shall dare to say that those vows were not fulfilled in that Paradise whereof the forest of Baxendale had been but a foretaste and a type?

Joshua Freemantle then rode on to the Hall, followed by a small company of Roundheads and filled with the passion of war and the frenzy of religious zeal. With the soldiers' help he burned the house to the ground, thinking (poor, misguided soul!) that he was thereby doing God service, just as he thought he had saved his daughter's soul alive by slaying her in Baxendale Woods rather than let her mate with a son of Belial (as he considered all who were not supporters of Cromwell). He also had much to learn when at last he went to his own place, and found how terribly he had misrepresented the God Whom he had sincerely, though ignorantly, worshipped.

It was not until after Richard Cromwell's death,

and the restoration to the throne of King Charles the Second, that the property was given back to Hubert Baxendale, Sir Walter's younger brother. In the meanwhile it lay—a desolate and neglected ruin—silent save for the cawing of the rooks by day and the screeching of the owls by night. But then Hubert claimed it as his brother's heir at law; and the king at once recognised his claims, and restored the large estate of Baxendale to its rightful owner.

For some years Hubert Baxendale saved up his revenues in order to rebuild the Hall; and by the time that James the Second was sitting upon his brother's throne, a fine red-brick house had grown up on the old site of Baxendale Hall—a house which was destined to be enlivened by the laughter of several generations of Baxendales before the third part of the ancient prophecy came true.

Thus perished Sir Walter Baxendale and the woman of his choice: and thus was fulfilled the second part of the curse of Vivien of the Glade.

CHAPTER I.

THE BURTONS.

"A merry heart goes all the way,"
As Shakespeare once was pleased to say.

"It strikes me, Nancy," remarked Anthony Burton, looking critically at his cousin, "that Laurence Baxendale is inclined to be sweet upon you. I wonder at the fact, I confess; but my eagle eye cannot help perceiving it."

"I doubt if he has the sense," replied Nancy; "but it would do him all the good in the world."

Anthony tilted his straw hat still further over his eyes: "Your lack of humility, my dear child, is only equalled by your lack of justification to be anything else but humble. What there is in you to induce any man, not bound to you by the ties of relationship, to think about you twice, I fail to imagine; but the fact remains that our friend Baxendale does think about you twice; and facts have to be reckoned with."

"Twice?—and the rest," said Nancy laconically.

"Now if he thought twice about Nora, I should find more excuse for him," continued Anthony, turn-

ing his attentions to his younger cousin; "Nora—though far from being all that I could wish—has certain claims to good looks."

"Thank you," responded Nora.

Nancy's good humour remained unruffled: "Yes, there is no doubt that Nora is much better looking than I am. I've discovered that it is a universal law of nature that of two sisters the second is always the better looking and the taller, from the days of Leah and Rachel downwards. If there are any brains going about, the elder sister generally fixes upon them: but as there are no brains going about in our family, this doesn't affect us."

"Speak for yourself, my dear," demurred Anthony; "Nora and I are simply bursting with brain-power. But we do not despise you for your inferiority in this respect: we merely pity."

But Nancy was not attending: "I'm very glad you've noticed that Mr. Baxendale is rather taken with me, for I'd got an idea that way myself; and it is a comfort to find it confirmed even by such an idiot as you, Tony."

"Allow me to tender you a hearty vote of thanks for the kind—the too kind—terms in which you are pleased to refer to my intellectual endowments," murmured Anthony.

"But he tries dreadfully hard not to admire me—that's the best of the joke. It entertains me most enormously to see him struggling to defend himself against my charms."

"I know exactly what you mean, Nan," cried Nora; "when you say anything funny he tries all he knows how not to laugh, but to be properly shocked."

"Yes; doesn't he? And that makes me try to be all the funnier. And it is a pity it takes him like that; for he really has got a very nice sense of humour if he'd give it its head, and not curb it with proprieties."

"Still I don't see why he shouldn't admire you if he wants to," Anthony continued; "as I remarked before, I should never want to admire you myself; but if I did feel any inclination in that extraordinary direction, I should have no conscientious scruples against indulging it to the full."

"I once knew a man," said Nancy, "who divided the girls he made love to into those he made love to on Sundays and those he made love to on week-days: and he said nothing would induce him to make love to me on a Sunday—his mother wouldn't like it—though he'd devote the six other days entirely to the pursuit with pleasure."

"Then I shouldn't have let him," interrupted Nora; "I'd have been made love to by him on Sundays or not at all. I wouldn't let a man pick and choose his times and seasons in that rude way."

"I didn't; and the result was he didn't do it at all."

"I expect that is generally the result when you are concerned," sighed Tony.

Nancy laughed. "Is it? That's all you know about it."

"But why doesn't Baxendale want to admire you? That's what I can't see."

"I suppose he couldn't afford to marry," replied Nora wisely, "unless he married a much richer girl than one of us."

"Oh! I don't think it's that," argued Nancy; "Mr. Baxendale is just the sort of man to marry the most unsuitable woman he could find. You see, he is high-principled and honourable and conscientious; and honourable, conscientious people always have scruples against knowing the right men and marrying the right women."

"Then what is his objection to you?" persisted Tony. "If you aren't rich enough, aren't you poor enough?"

"I don't believe it is money at all: money would never enter into the counsels of such a man as Laurence Baxendale. He thinks I am common: that's where the shoe pinches."

"Confound his cheek! Where does the commonness come in, I should like to know?"

"Oh! he thinks it is awfully low not to have strolled into England with William the Conqueror, and sat still here ever since. He is the sort of man who expects you to be always taking your ancestors about with you, and getting them to give you letters of introduction, don't you know? He never moves without taking a lot of ancestors about with him, just as some people never move without taking a lot of servants."

"I know the sort."

"I thought he'd have had a fit the other day when I said that somehow we'd mislaid our great-great-grandfather, and though we'd searched for him diligently in the rag-bag and the waste-paper basket, we couldn't lay our hands on him anywhere. He didn't in the least see that it was funny."

Nora shook her pretty head. "How tiresome of him! I can't bear people who don't see when things are funny."

"Well, he generally does see when things are funny—that is one of his principal charms in my eyes. But he regards family and birth and blood and all that sort of thing as far too sacred to be trifled with or lightly spoken of. I'm thankful that I belong to a new family that has no curse, but gas and water laid on."

"There is good reason for your *Te Deum*," agreed Anthony.

"You see, Mr. Baxendale has a curse, and everything else that is correct and uncomfortable and aristocratic; and he thinks it dreadfully plebeian of us to be making iron. In fact, he is one of the people who thinks it is dreadfully vulgar to make anything but mistakes; and of those they make plenty."

"I've never quite grasped," said Anthony, "why he and his mother have suddenly come down to live under the shadow of their uninhabited ancestral home."

"Oh! I've got it all out of Faith Fairfax," answered

Nora. "You know the Baxendales are frightfully poor; and when old Mr. Baxendale died Lady Alicia went to live with her brother, Lord Portcullis. Laurence was tremendously clever, and went to Oxford with a sort of scholarship, which they called a Post Office Order of Merton, or something like that."

"I knew he was clever," said Nancy, "or else he wouldn't admire me."

"When he left Oxford he became tutor to Lord Drawbridge, Lord Portcullis's eldest son: and this went on till Drawbridge went to school and Lord Portcullis married again."

"Till both their Lordships went to school, in short," concluded Anthony.

"If they can't afford actually to live at Baxendale Hall, they like to be near it, I suppose," Nora said.

"Not the rose, but near the rose: though what's the fun of living near the rose if you can't possess it, I don't know," said Tony.

"Neither do I," agreed Nora. "If I can't buy a thing for my own, I hate seeing it in the shop windows."

"I believe that Faith Fairfax is in love with Mr. Baxendale," Nancy said slowly.

The other two looked up with interest.

"What makes you think that?" asked Nora.

"Because she always knows where he is, and always pretends that she doesn't."

"Now Faith would be a suitable match for our

friend," Tony remarked; "she'd have property enough to set Baxendale Hall on its legs again, and propriety enough not to knock Laurence off his."

Nancy nodded. "I know that; and that would be just the reason why he would never fall in love with her. Trust him for invariably going against his own interests when he has the chance."

"I think it would be rather dull to be in love with Mr. Baxendale," said Nora; "it would be like going to an oratorio every day of one's life, or lodging in a cathedral."

"What rubbish!" Nancy exclaimed: "besides, oratorios and cathedrals are very nice in their way."

"Of course they are, Nancy dear: I only said it would be rather dull to be married to one."

"Well, I don't agree with you. Mr. Baxendale is an ideal sort of person, with high aims and sound principles, and everything else *en suite*. And though it would be horrid to have ideal people for one's relations, I think they are the most satisfactory sort to fall in love with."

Nora looked doubtful. "But why?"

"Well, you see," explained Nancy, "falling in love is an ideal sort of thing; and if you fall in love with a person, and then found he was sordid and commonplace, it would be like seeing an angel and then finding the angelic robes were made of cheap calico. Now Mr. Baxendale is tiresome and trying and absurdly fastidious: but he would always be more or less ideal. I don't mean he is ideal in the sense of

being faultless—anything but; he is ideal in the sense of always seeing the right course and—as far as in him lies—of following it."

"Faith is ideal, too," said Nora softly.

"Faith is an angel," Nancy agreed emphatically.

"And not an angel in cheap calico either," added her cousin.

"No; Faith is just perfect," Nancy continued; "but all the same, it would do Mr. Baxendale far more good to fall in love with me than with her."

"I should have thought ideal people ought to fall in love with ideal people," suggested Tony, "on the approved principle of 'a hair of the dog that bit you'; and in that case Baxendale and Miss Fairfax seem made to order for each other. It would be a match, not only striking on the box, but striking from every possible point of view."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders. "A hair of the dog that bit you is supposed to be curative, you silly; and love is the one disease that is the worse for being cured. I think that Laurence and Faith would cure each other of perfection by their own perfectness: and then where would they be, stupid?"

"Goodness—or badness—only knows!"

"Now it is an education for anyone to fall in love with one of us Burtons," Nancy went on. "I've noticed it often."

"So have I," her cousin agreed; "and that has led me to make the educational process as easy and pleasant as possible to such young ladies as appeared

to me worthy of the training and likely to do it justice."

"You see we are so healthy-minded that we cure any tendency to morbidness at once: and we are so natural that affectation cannot exist within our borders. Then we are funny; and as a rule the curse of love is seriousness. Love as a tragedy is a bore; but love as a comedy is a delight to the actors, and is worth ten-and-six a stall to the audience. Now no one could regard a love affair with one of us in the light of a tragedy: could they?"

"They certainly could not," replied Anthony; "unless, of course, we accepted them."

"Still I'm not sure that this is altogether a virtue," Nora remarked sadly. "I believe people enjoy a love affair more if they can cry over it; and we never can."

"That's the worst of us," said Nancy with a sigh; "we spoil half the fun of life by laughing at it. If we could only cry over things, and not see that they are funny, we should enjoy them a million times more. I'm sure we should. It spoils a love affair to see the funny side of it; and yet I always do."

"Mr. Baxendale wouldn't see the funny side of a love affair," said Nora.

"Oh! yes he would—that's just the sort of thing he would see the joke of. It is only solemn things —such as truth and honour and the Church and the Baxendales—that he takes so seriously. As a matter of fact, I believe he is too superior a person to fall in

love at all; he would think it *infra dig* for a Baxendale to love an ordinary woman; and that is why it would do him such a world of good to fall in love with me. It is extremely good for people to be obliged to do what they consider *infra dig;* it knocks the nonsense out of them."

"It seems to me," remarked Anthony, "that there is a good deal of nonsense to be knocked out of Mr. Laurence Baxendale, and that our beloved Nancy would enjoy the job."

"I really believe I should," agreed Nancy.

"The worst of Mr. Baxendale is that he is so frightening," said Nora; "he says such sarcastic things."

"Oh! I'm not frightened of him," replied her sister airily. (But she was.)

"I always feel he is despising us and making fun of us," Nora went on; "he has such a dreadfully sneering way with him."

"I don't care whether he sneers or not," Nancy persisted.

"But I thought you were under the impression that he admired you," suggested her cousin.

"So he does; but he doesn't approve of me: that's all the difference, silly."

"I wonder if he ever laughs at his mother," remarked Nora. "She is so deliciously vague that it must indeed be a privation to be prevented by the Fifth Commandment from thoroughly enjoying her."

Nancy shook her head. "No, I feel sure he doesn't: Mr. Baxendale is the sort of man that the Commandments would have great weight with. And, by the way, here he comes in the flesh round the corner of the terrace, so I can begin the knocking-out process at once." And the three young Burtons hoisted themselves up out of the garden-chairs in which they were lounging, and went to meet a slight, fair, aristocratic-looking man who was being piloted by a footman across the lawn.

It was a summer's afternoon, and Anthony and his cousins were sitting in the garden of Wayside, the Burton's house, about three miles from the manufacturing town of Silverhampton. Mr. Burton, the girls' father, was an iron-master, as his father had been before him; and he and Anthony drove every day to the Works, which lay in the dark valley on the other side of the ridge which divides, as by a straight line, the great Black Country of the Midlands from the woods and hills and meadowlands of west Mershire.

Mr. Burton had married a Miss Farringdon—a distant cousin of the Farringdons of Sedgehill—and they were blessed with two sons and two daughters: Nancy, who had wit, and Nora, who had beauty, respectively aged twenty-two and eighteen; and two small boys, Arthur and Ambrose, who were enjoying life and neglecting their education at a preparatory school.

Anthony, the only child of Mr. Burton's late

brother, had inherited his father's share in the Works, and was now his uncle's sole partner. His mother died when he was born; and since the death of his father, when Anthony was only ten years old, the latter had made Wayside his home, and had been treated by Mr. and Mrs. Burton exactly as if he were a son of their own. To Nancy and Nora he had always been as the kindest of brothers; and although he teased them in brotherly fashion, he was —also in brotherly fashion—ready to fight their battles to the death, and to knock down any other man who should venture to tease them as he did.

The Burtons were a light-hearted race who had never known either great riches or uncomfortable poverty, and so were innocent alike of the responsibilities of the one and the anxieties of the other. They had never been rich enough to be economical, nor poor enough to be extravagant; so they took life easily, and extracted pleasure from the most unpromising sources; and—as is the custom in this too-sorrowful world—were popular in proportion to their cheerfulness. Mankind, as at present constituted, dearly loves the people who make it laugh.

Wayside, the local habitation of the Burtons, was a red-brick house on the highroad leading from Silverhampton to Salopshire, and thence to the western sea. It was approached from the road by a long, solemn drive, bordered by specimen shrubs, which Nancy said had a depressing appearance, because evergreens always gave her the blues; but the house

itself was cheerful and comfortable enough; and the garden at the back faded away into fields, which, in their turn, ended in some of the prettiest lanes in England. As a child Nancy thought that these lanes led straight into fairyland; as a woman she knew that they did; but this fuller knowledge only came after she had trodden those green and mysterious ways in company with the man of her choice, and sundry others. There was nothing narrow or exclusive about Nancy: her power of making friends was only equalled by her capacity of turning these friends into lovers on the slightest provocation; and if the friends declined to be thus transformed, no bitterness was excited in Nancy's breast, as it might have been in the breast of a more sentimental and serious-minded young woman. Everything was fish that came to her net: and if it was not fish, it was fowl or good red herring, which did quite as well as far as she was concerned. If men fell in love with her, she enjoyed their love: if they were only friends with her, she enjoyed their friendship: and she regarded either as the best joke in the world for the time being. Nora to a great extent moulded herself upon Nancy; for if Nora was the beauty, Nancy had the stronger personality.

Nora Burton really was extremely pretty, with dark brown hair, large blue eyes, and a bright pink colour: she was tall and slender, and carried herself like a queen. Nancy always described herself—and with much truth—as "a Colonial edition of Nora";

she was shorter and paler, with darker hair; and her eyes were smaller than her sister's, though quite as blue. The boys were more like Nora—a merry, good-looking little couple. All the Burtons were endowed with a very saving faith in themselves, and a very sincere admiration for each other: and—which is the secret of all true family (and conjugal) happiness—they appreciated and applauded one another's jokes to the full. Even the love which beareth and believeth all things, staggers now and then when its attempts at wit are greeted with the stony stare of the unamused; but the Burtons knew better than to put their family affection to so severe a test.

As Nancy crossed the lawn to greet Laurence Baxendale, she found time *en route* for an *aside* to the footman, bidding him fetch his mistress and tea; then she devoted herself to charming her guest to the utmost extent of her powers, as was her invariable habit whether the guest happened to be male or female.

"Come and sit down," she said; "I have told Frederick to bring out tea and mother at once, as I feel sure you must be dying for one or the other."

Baxendale bowed: "Thank you, Miss Burton. Naturally both will be welcome; but it would be invidious, wouldn't it, to point out which will be the more so?"

"We have just been talking about you," Nancy observed, as the four young people seated themselves.

Laurence winced: he was one of the few people who hate to be talked about. But this of course was inexplicable to Nancy, who would rather have been abused than not mentioned at all. "Indeed? what have you found to say about me?" he asked.

"We have agreed that you are rather like a cathedral or an oratorio: and that we are decidedly frightened of you."

"I should not have thought that you would be frightened of me," replied Laurence, who was frightened out of his wits at Miss Burton, and the terrible doubt as to what she might say. "I am a most harmless creature."

"Oh, yes, you're harmless enough: but you are so dreadfully truthful and upright; and that is what makes you so cathedrally."

"I never feel like a cathedral," Laurence protested.

"And you don't look like one. Elephants always look like walking cathedrals, don't you think?—when you see them strolling about at the Zoo; just as if they were built of grey stone, which had been exposed to the elements for centuries."

"I can't say, Miss Burton: I don't know that I have ever seen a walking cathedral."

"But you've seen a circulating library: and that's something of the same sort. But, as I was saying, you don't look like a cathedral—you only shed a gentle and cathedrally sort of influence: and that is because you are so truthful and upright."

"It is generally supposed to be the best policy, isn't it? So, at least, I've always been told."

"Then you have been brought up on proverbs," said Nora, joining in the conversation; "and they are invariably misleading."

"Of course they are," added Nancy; "if you let yourself be guided by proverbs, you will believe that the better you behave the better-looking you will become: which—as Euclid wisely remarked—is absurd."

"Then aren't you truthful and upright?" asked Laurence, endeavouring to divert the conversation from himself and his moral excellencies.

Nancy laughed: "Not we! We never tell the truth, unless we are convinced that it is funnier than fiction; and we always take what doesn't belong to us, if we happen to fancy it."

"From hearts down to postage stamps," added Anthony under his breath.

"But none of us has ever stolen on a large scale, except mother," Nancy went on: "did you ever hear the tale of mother in the boot shop, Mr. Baxendale?"

"No; please tell it me."

"Well, one day at the seaside I went with mother to buy a new pair of boots. She tried on several pairs, in the orthodox fashion, and finally settled upon a pair that was faintly less uncomfortable than the others; whereupon we left the shop. All the way home we saw people looking at us and giggling: and though we feel we are worthy of all notice, we see

nothing in our appearance to excite mirth. Therefore we wondered."

"Naturally," said Laurence.

"At last, one woman—braver than the rest—stopped us and said to mother, between paroxysms of laughter, 'Are you aware, Madam, that you have a bunch of baby's shoes hanging behind you?' It turned out—would you believe it?—that when mother sat down to be tried on, a bunch of children's shoes had caught on the fringe of her mantle; and she had walked with them dangling behind her all up the street. You know the sort; ankle-straps in every conceivable shade of leather. Of course we nearly died of laughing: and that is the only time any one of us has ever been actually convicted of shop-lifting. But here is the thief herself."

Tea and Mrs. Burton arrived simultaneously; and the former was dispensed by Nancy with much enlivening conversation, wherein the others joined. Which Baxendale, in spite of his efforts to the contrary, enjoyed to the full. And when a man has to make an effort not to enjoy the conversation of one particular woman, things are pretty bad with him.

At last he rose: "I wonder what o'clock it is. I seem to be staying an unconscionable time—like Charles the Second; but to me it has appeared short—as I daresay it did to him."

Nancy looked at her watch-bracelet: "I am not a very good guide as to time, because my watch is

always either ten minutes too slow or three-quarters of an hour too fast, and you never can be quite sure which."

"There must be something wrong with its internal arrangements," said Mrs. Burton, with her pleasant laugh; "which perhaps accounts for your being late for everything, Nancy dear."

"Maybe: anyway I must admit that punctuality is the one virtue which I don't happen to possess."

"Can I do anything towards the watch's recovery?" asked Laurence, holding out his hand for the pretty toy.

"No, thank you. When it is worse than usual I just give it a stir-up inside with a hairpin."

Laurence smiled. "That is a bit drastic, isn't it?"

"But it always does it good. For at least a week after the hairpin treatment it never loses more than five minutes in the day, or gains more than thirty: but after that it drops back into its old evil ways again, just as we all do the next week but one after a really stirring sermon."

"I am afraid sermons never stir me up at all—whatever hairpins might do," said Laurence.

"Oh! but they stir up Nancy," cried Nora: "sermons, I mean, of course—not hairpins."

Nancy nodded: "I should just think they do. They give me thrills all down my spine—just as the National Anthem and falling in love do—and make me really an exquisite character for about four days. Once for a week, after Mr. Arbuthnot had preached

about unselfishness, I went for a walk with Nora every day: and another time, after he'd preached against vanity and love of dress, I let Tony go for a whole afternoon with his tie wriggling up over the back of his collar, and never told him of it."

"And I was not behind you in virtuous behaviour," added Anthony: "that very same sermon led me to leave a smut, which had settled upon our dear Nancy's ineffective nose, unwept, unhonoured and unsung for at least four good hours by Shrewsbury clock. And it was on a day when she was particularly fancying herself, too."

Nancy tossed her head: "What a goose you are, Tony! All the same, I wonder how you could resist the pleasure of finding fault with me when there was any just ground for such fault finding."

"I admit it was difficult, my dear young cousin: a less self-denying man could not have withstood the temptation. There are some things which are absolutely necessary to a man's well-being and peace of mind; and one of them is pointing out the faults of his female relations."

"Another is pointing out, in a photograph of any place which he has visited, the hotel where he happened to stay," said Nancy: "no normal human being—either man or woman—can help doing that."

"And if we can put a cross opposite our own particular bedroom window, delight reaches the point of ecstasy," added Laurence.

Anthony gazed at Nancy in mock admiration:

"My dear young friend, you are too clever by half: if you get much sharper you'll cut yourself."

"Well, I haven't yet, anyhow: though I've often been tempted to cut you."

"There you are, at it again," sighed Anthony: "when shall I persuade you to be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever? It would be such a pleasant change if you would! And, besides, you'll never get a husband if you go on scintillating like this; men don't want a blaze of fireworks on their own hearthstones."

"They'll want me right enough, whether I hearthstone or whether I firework," retorted Nancy, who never could resist squabbling with Tony when she had the chance.

"In that case," replied her cousin, "they'll soon find out their mistake—at least the fortunate (or rather the unfortunate) one whom you select, will. The beauteous firework so fiercely sought, will become an intolerable nuisance by being confined to the domestic hearthstone. I'm sure I pity the poor fellow, whoever he may be. When I meet him I shall hug my single blessedness, feeling how far my high failure overleaps the bounds of his low success."

Mr. Baxendale turned to Nancy: "Do you know I think your cousin is rather wasting his sympathy?"

"No, I'm not," Anthony contradicted him: "you don't know her as well as I do."

"Which is my misfortune rather than my fault."

"That may be; but it is a most fortunate misfor-

tune for you. She'll make a strict wife, won't she, Nora?"

"Not she," replied the younger Miss Burton: "of course she'll expect the man to do things her way instead of his own, but that will only be good for him."

"And though I shall expect the man to do things my way instead of his own, I shall never expect him to say, or even to think, that it is a better way than his own: that's where lots of women make such a mistake."

"Wise Nancy!" exclaimed Mrs. Burton.

"Well, all the same, I return to my point," said Anthony, "and that is that Nancy is becoming too clever to get a husband at all."

Nancy merely made a face at him, without taking the trouble to reply.

"You silly children!" said Mrs. Burton, rising from her chair and shaking Laurence's outstretched hand. "Well, if you must go, good-bye, Mr. Baxendale. I am afraid you will imagine that I have a most frivolous family."

"I shan't think any the worse of them on that score," Laurence politely expostulated.

But he did—in those days before Nancy had taught him how wise it is to be silly sometimes: and how dull it is (when once one has been silly) to become wise again.

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CHAPTER II.

BAXENDALE HALL.

> Upon a hill the old house stood,
> Commanding stream and field and wood.

Baxendale Hall, which was built for the third time—having been twice destroyed by fire—in the reign of James the Second, was a fine, square house of red brick, with stone facings, and the coat-of-arms of the Baxendales, also in stone, carved over the front door. It stood in the centre of a beautiful park, on the borders of Mershire and Salopshire; and the house was situated upon such an eminence that its cellars were on a line with the top of the tower of Silverhampton Church. Thus Silverhampton and Baxendale Hall looked at each other, from their respective hills, across a fruitful and well-populated valley, a pleasant land of meadows and orchards and comfortable houses, made happy by the money that was coined in the murky coal-fields on the other side of Silverhampton town.

The Baxendales were one of the oldest families in Mershire; and they had lived at Baxendale Hall ever since Doomsday Book was edited—and probably before that. But of late years their prosperity had dwindled, as is the way nowadays of all prosperity

which has its being solely in land; and when the late Mr. Baxendale died of a broken heart, owing to the pecuniary difficulties which beset him, it was found that the rents of the estate were so reduced, and the mortgages upon it so heavy, that his son came into an income of only some very few hundreds a year; and those few hundreds were made still fewer by the enormous fire insurance which all the owners of Baxendale were bound to pay, in consideration of the family curse which foretold that Baxendale Hall should once more—for the third time—"be made fuel of fire."

The late Mr. Baxendale had married for love and not for money—a peculiarity of his race—Lady Alicia Moate, a daughter of the Earl of Portcullis; and by her had one child, a son, Laurence. Her ladyship possessed as little wit as money, but she had beauty in excess; and for her beauty Alwyn Baxendale loved, wooed and married her, and lived beyond his income, and finally died broken-hearted because that income was insufficient to supply her somewhat exorbitant daily needs. Thus matters came to a crisis, Baxendale Hall was shut up, and only an old man and his wife left in it as caretakers; and Alicia went to rule the house of her brother, Lord Portcullis, while Laurence Baxendale officiated as tutor to his lordship's eldest son. When, however, Lord Portcullis took unto himself a second wife, Lady Alicia was compelled to seek a home elsewhere; so she and her son repaired to an untenanted farmhouse near

The Ways (a hamlet on the Baxendale estate), and about a mile and a half from the Hall.

The Ways was probably so called because five ways met there: one went eastward past the Burtons' house, and through the pretty village of Tetleigh, straight to Silverhampton: another took the opposite direction, and led the traveller, by the hills of Salopshire and Wales, to the coast of the western sea; a third went northward, down a shady lane, past Ways Hall, the home of the Fairfax family, to Codswell—a picturesque village whose cobble-paved street climbed bravely up a church-crowned hill which stood as high as Baxendale or Silverhampton; a fourth lay through the well-wooded glades of Baxendale Park, and finally—by slow ascents—reached the Hall itself; and the fifth went due south into a green maze of lanes, which wandered on and on until they finally lost themselves in fairyland—as English lanes have a knack of doing, if only they are taken in the right way.

There are few things more beautiful than a Mershire lane. It is beautiful in the winter, when the elm trees that overshadow it are transformed into coral-reefs by the magic touch of the hoar-frost; it is beautiful in the spring, when its hedges are white with May-blossom, and its ditches fringed with the lace-like hemlock; and it is beautiful in the autumn, when the climbing brambles adorn it on either side with crimson and gold; but it is most beautiful of all on a summer's evening, when the low-lying shafts

of light touch the bents and the feathery grasses, and turn the pathway into a golden pavement encircled by a veritable rainbow of emerald, until the traveller feels that he is treading a ladder worthy of the feet of angels, leading him—as the beauty of nature will always lead those who have eyes to see it—straight from earth to heaven.

The spot where these five ways met was marked by a group of fine old elm trees, growing upon a grassy mound; and round about it were clustered a farm or two and sundry cottages, a picturesque post-office and blacksmith's forge. It was a pretty hamlet in the typical English style; and its quaint little inn, by name *The Crown,* slumbered in a cosy bed of blossom, with a coverlet of climbing roses.

Ways Hall was a long, low, white house, clothed with Virginia creeper, which made it as a green bower in summer, while in autumn it appeared as a house which was enveloped by crimson flames, and yet was not consumed. It was set in the centre of velvet lawns which—like the famous lawns of Oxford—had been "rolled for five hundred years," and which sloped down to a large sheet of water, inhabited—and defended to the best of their ability—by a family of swans. The banks of this lake were covered every spring with daffodils and periwinkles, which looked at their reflection in the water and danced with pleasure at the sight. At least the daffodils did: the periwinkles only nodded and said to themselves, "What nice blue eyes we have!"

The Fairfaxes of The Ways were a good old family, but now had dwindled down to two—namely, Mrs. Fairfax and her daughter Faith. Mrs. Fairfax was a stately dame of the old school, who had never in her life sat in an easy chair or said a silly thing; and Faith was the raw material out of which saints and angels are manufactured. She had soft, fair hair, and a Madonna-like face; and in her eyes was that look which dwells in the eyes of all those chosen ones who see beyond this present world. Unselfish was an adjective not applicable to Faith Fairfax; selfless was the only description available for her. Had she lived in earlier times, Faith would inevitably have taken the veil; for she was one of the women who have a special vocation for religion, and seem made for the cloister rather than the hearth. As it was, she devoted herself to her mother and the poor; and the human side of her—as far as anything about Faith Fairfax was purely human—fell in love with Laurence Baxendale, and loved him in the ideal, worshipping way in which only such nun-like women can love. The high-minded, inflexible part of his character, which stirred up opposition in Nancy Burton, fitted exactly into Faith's more saintly nature; and while Nancy was slightly defiant and greatly afraid, Faith was humbly adoring.

As a boy, whenever anything went wrong, Laurence Baxendale turned to Faith to set it right again: as a man, he pursued very much the same course. She was a year or two older than he, and filled in his

life the place which his mother had left empty; for motherliness was the last attribute which could be laid to the charge of pretty, foolish Lady Alicia.

It is strange how, in the give and take of life, men take from the angelic and give to the purely human women with whom they are brought into contact. They make demands—excessive demands—upon the patience and forbearance and unselfishness of the women who love them; but it is the women who make excessive demands upon them that they love the best. Women who behave well rather than wisely, take credit to themselves for carrying their own cloaks, and climbing over their own stiles, and generally saving trouble for the men who are treading life's paths by their side. Foolish creatures! The men want to carry their cloaks and help them over the stiles, if only they will let them. Which shows that the proverbial Selfishness of Man is as effete and worn-out a bogey as the Dodo or the Sea Serpent or Religious Disability.

The most interesting feature of Baxendale Hall was a large library, filled with all manner of rare old books and fine pictures, containing many priceless manuscripts and valuable prints. It occupied the whole length of the front of the house upon the first floor, and was exactly over the great entrance hall. Behind it, and over the dining and the drawing-rooms, was the suite of rooms always occupied by the master and mistress of the house; and next to these the nurseries and schoolroom, where genera-

tions of little Baxendales had played their games and learnt their lessons. The guest-chambers were in one wing of the house over the justice-room and the muniment-room, and the rooms where the men smoked, played billiards and managed the estate; the opposite wing was devoted to the kitchens and offices, and over them the servants' apartments. The front of the Hall looked east, to where the old churches of Silverhampton and Sedgehill were landmarks to all the surrounding country; and the gardens at the back borrowed much of their glory from the sun which set behind the distant Welsh hills.

"I wish, mother, if it wouldn't bother you, that you would see rather more of the Burton girls," Laurence Baxendale said to Lady Alicia the day after he had been to tea at Wayside. "I know they aren't exactly your style; but I should be awfully glad if you would be kind to them, as they are always very kind to me, and I enjoy going there immensely."

"Certainly, dear Laurence, certainly. I have called on Mrs. Burton and she has returned the call, but there is no real friendship in conventionalities such as that; and real friendship is so beautiful between neighbours, I think—so very beautiful; and makes everyday life such a touching and exquisite thing."

"Yes; it is a good thing to be on friendly terms with the people about you."

"As you say, dear Laurence, they are not exactly my style or in our set; their father makes iron, and I think it is beautiful to make iron—it must teach

men to be so great and strong. And then it is so sweet and Christian, I always think, to show kindness to persons not quite in one's own rank of society; because, I dare say, one can do one's duty in an ironworks as well as on a landed property. In fact, one can do one's duty in almost any rank of life; that, I think, is such a comforting thought, because it is always so nice for everybody to do their duty if they can. There is something very soothing in doing one's duty, don't you think?"

"*Soothing* isn't exactly the word I should have used," said Laurence dryly.

"And then the Burton girls are so charming, too —such sweet, simple, unsophisticated creatures!"

Lady Alicia had an amiable habit of praising all the people with whom she was brought into contact; but she slightly took the edge off her own commendation by invariably praising them for the qualities which they did not happen to possess.

The next afternoon she walked up to Wayside, and found the girls and their mother at home.

"I am so glad you are in, dear Mrs. Burton," she began in her usual gushing manner; "it always seems so insincere and hollow to call upon people when they are not at home; and insincerity and hollowness are such terrible things, don't you think?—such very terrible things."

"They are certainly not lovable qualities," agreed Mrs. Burton: and Nancy winked at Nora behind Lady Alicia's elegant back.

"I want to see more of you and your dear girls. I was only saying to my son yesterday how beautiful it is to be neighbourly with the people who live near one—so sweet and Christian—even if they don't happen to be the sort of people one would choose."

"It is very kind of you to say so, Lady Alicia," replied Mrs. Burton, manfully repressing her natural desire to smile.

"And what are your dear girls' Christian names? I am always so interested in people's Christian names and the months in which their birthdays are. I think one can learn so much from these, don't you? They are so interesting and suggestive, and often such a key to character."

"Do you mean to the characters of the people themselves, or of their godfathers and godmothers?" asked Nancy, with ominous demureness.

"Oh! dear child, of the people themselves, of course; how could it be the key to the character of their godfathers and godmothers, when we never know who their godfathers and godmothers are? They are not given in the Peerage, you know; though I am not at all sure that they ought not to be. It would be rather nice and orthodox if they were, don't you think?"

"It would be rather interesting," said Nancy, "as showing whom they expected to leave them a fortune."

"And there is so much in names. I always think

it was such a mistake of dear Shakespeare to say that a rose would smell as sweet if you called it something else; it couldn't, you know. And what are your dear girls' names, Mrs. Burton?"

"Nancy and Nora."

"Oh, how sweet! How very sweet for them both to begin with the same letter! I always think there is so much sympathy between people whose names begin with the same letter. It was such a comfort to me that my dear husband's name began with A, like mine. Do you know, I don't think I could ever have loved a man whose Christian name began with B? He would have seemed so far off; almost as if he were living in another planet. I remember once meeting a man and his wife who were called Francis and Frances. I thought it so very touching and beautiful."

"It will be rather a bore if Nancy and I have to marry men whose names begin with N," said Nora, "because there are so few nice men's names beginning with N."

"And it would be horrid to marry men who weren't nice," added Nancy.

Lady Alicia took it all in solemn earnest: "Oh! dear children, there is Nathaniel—not exactly a pretty name, you know, but so Biblical and suggestive. I think it must be lovely to have a Bible name, especially on Sundays; it must make one feel in such perfect harmony with the day."

"But we can't both marry men who are called

Nathaniel," persisted Nancy; "it would be so very confusing, and we should get them all mixed up."

"So you would, my dear; but I feel sure there are other nice names beginning with N, if only one could recall them."

"But you didn't call your son by a name beginning with A," suggested Nora.

"Ah! no. Dear Laurence was called after an ancestor of his who did something very heroic and touching—I forget exactly what it was. And I think it is so ennobling to call one's children by names which remind one of heroic deeds, don't you? It seems to elevate the tone of everyday life by beautiful memories; and there is nothing more refining, I find, than beautiful memories. Ah! what a priceless gift memory is! What should we do without it, I wonder?"

The girls thought that Lady Alicia ought to know; but they did not say so.

Her ladyship ambled on as usual, without giving any one else a chance to speak: "I do hope, dear Mrs. Burton, that your girls are cultured. I think it is so sweet for young people to be cultured, and to read nice poetry. I remember when I was a girl I used to read all the poetry I could lay my hands on, except Lord Byron's *Don Quixote;* dear papa never would allow that."

"Ah! we have not been allowed to read it, either," remarked Nancy.

"Haven't you? How very interesting! I think

it is so very beautiful when parents overlook their children's reading. It seems to bring the Fifth Commandment into everyday life. And it is so sweet and Christian to keep the Commandments when one can, don't you think? I think one should always try to do so for the sake of setting the servants a good example, if not for one's own."

"I think it is nice for parents to take an interest in everything that their children do," said Mrs. Burton.

"It is, indeed, dear Mrs. Burton. And I do hope your young people are fond of culture. I am devoted to reading myself, but, unfortunately, the minute I begin to read my thoughts begin to wander, so, unfortunately, I am unable to indulge my literary tastes as I should wish. It is a great deprivation!"

"But you have the pleasure of your own thoughts," suggested Nora; "and that is far greater. I'd much rather think my own thoughts than read other people's."

Lady Alicia sighed: "Ah! my dear, that is because you are not literary. If you had my temperament you would live upon books. I remember once starting a Shakespeare-reading society when I was living with my dear brother, Lord Portcullis, for all the girls in the neighbourhood. I thought it would train their minds; and it is so nice for the minds of the young to be trained."

"Very nice," said Mrs. Burton; and she had not time to say more before Lady Alicia went on:

"Of course, there are things in Shakespeare not

altogether suitable for the young to read, so I asked the clergyman's wife to mark all the passages which she felt could be read without detriment to the fresh and untrained minds I was endeavouring to cultivate. I think clergymen's wives are just the people to do that sort of thing, don't you, dear Mrs. Burton? It seems exactly the kind of duty they would enjoy."

"I feel sure they would. And did this particular one justify the confidence you had placed in her?" Mrs. Burton asked.

"Well, it was very unfortunate, but there was a mistake. Instead of marking all the passages to be read, as I had asked her, she marked all the passages to be left out. And most naturally the class read those and left the others out. But how could I help it? I assumed that she had done what I had asked her."

The two girls coughed violently in order to stifle their laughter, and their mother managed to inquire, with a fairly sober front: "But didn't it occur to you at the time what had happened?"

"Well, it did occur to me that the remarks were a little disjointed. But remarks are often disjointed in plays—to allow for changing the scenery or the actor's clothes, I suppose; so I took it as a matter of course. But it was annoying, all the same. It made people laugh, though what there was to laugh at I cannot imagine. But that is a growing evil of the present day, don't you think? People treat every-

thing as a joke, and speak lightly of quite serious things."

"It is a virtue of the present day, I think," argued Nancy, "to laugh instead of crying, whenever it is possible. My heart is like Beatrice's—'keeps, poor fool! on the windy side of care'; and I'm thankful for it."

Lady Alicia sighed her dainty little sigh: "Ah! my poor, dear husband was like that, and so is Laurence. They both of them have always laughed at things that seem to me quite pathetic. But then I am extremely sensitive, and my poor husband was not, nor is Laurence. They could not, of course, help being so unlike me, nor do I in any way blame them for it; but it has been to me a matter of regret."

"What sort of things does Mr. Baxendale laugh at?" asked Nancy, who was athirst for any form of knowledge concerning Laurence.

"Just the things his poor dear father used to laugh at—things that you would have expected them to be quite sorry about instead. Our poverty, for instance; and the way we have come down in the world; and his own shyness and unpopularity; and the fact that he can't afford to marry; and lots of really quite sad things like that."

"I see." And Nancy's voice was very low.

"I often say to him what a pity it is that he can't afford to marry, because a charming wife is such a nice thing for a man to have, don't you think? In fact, I should quite pity him, poor boy! if only

he would let me. But whenever I mention the subject he just turns it off into a joke, and never seems to take it seriously at all, so my sympathy is wasted. And I am such a sympathetic creature, you know, that Laurence's callousness pains me."

"I don't think it need," said Mrs. Burton gently.

"Ah! but I am so sensitive: I shrivel up like a sensitive plant when my feelings are hurt; and Laurence is always hurting them. I am sure he does not mean to do so, but he is so thick-skinned that he does not understand a sensitive nature like mine. His poor father was just the same."

"What sort of things did he laugh at?" asked Nancy, with unslaked curiosity.

"Oh! he used to laugh at our poverty, too, and at what a wretched match he had turned out for me. Of course, I ought to have done much better, and I used to say so, but he just treated it as a joke. And it really was no joke at all for me, who had so many really good offers when I was young."

Nancy's lip curled with scorn, and she judged Lady Alicia with the merciless judgment of those who have neither married nor been disappointed in marriage.

"People used to say," her ladyship continued, "that Alwyn died of a broken heart when he found that he would be obliged to turn out of Baxendale. But that was quite a mistake, and merely shows how people ought not to talk about things which they do not understand. I think that is another of the faults

of the rising generation, dear Mrs. Burton: people are so prone, so sadly prone, to talk about matters which are quite beyond their comprehension."

"And not only of the rising generation," said Mrs. Burton dryly.

"Ah, no! It was a fault of my poor, dear Alwyn. He never in the least understood my finer perceptions, and yet he was always talking about them in a slightly sarcastic way; and he had none of his own, poor dear!"

"Ah!" Nancy remarked.

"And as for dying because he could not afford to live at Baxendale," Lady Alicia continued, "it was all nonsense. He never really felt it at all, but made jokes about bringing me to the workhouse till the hour of his death. Now *I* did feel it, who had been brought up in such luxury, and always expected to make such a brilliant match."

"I have no doubt you did," said Mrs. Burton kindly, endeavouring, as was her custom, to make the best of everybody. "Both you and Mr. Baxendale must have felt leaving such a beautiful home."

"But he didn't feel it; that was the remarkable thing. He just laughed at it as he did at everything else; a sad habit, as I remarked a few minutes ago, and one which I grieve to say dear Laurence inherits! Almost the last thing he said to me, about an hour before his death, was to make a half-laughing apology for having given me only a heart full of love

instead of a purse full of money, but adding that he was about to make the only reparation in his power."

"Poor Mr. Baxendale!" and Mrs. Burton's eyes were full of tears.

"Oh! do you think so? For my part, it quite shocked me to hear him speak sarcastically at such a time. I cannot think that a death-bed is the place for sarcasm. It seems to me so sweet to read the Bible and speak lovingly to all your friends at a time like that, so as to leave a nice impression behind you."

Nancy tossed her head: "It is a pity that a trifling incident, such as death, should divert the minds of some people from the importance of making an effective exit." She was very impertinent, there was no doubt of that; but perhaps there was some excuse for her.

Her impertinence, however, was lost upon Lady Alicia. That lady would as soon have expected a girl of Nancy's rank to be pert to her as she would have expected a polyanthus to jump up and bite her. So she innocently continued: "In death, as in life, my poor, dear husband never cared about what sort of impression he was making upon anybody. He was far too thick-skinned for that, and Laurence is just like him. Which is really very hard upon me, as I always think it would have been so nice to live with people who really understood one and sympathised with one, and who were alive to the higher traits of a really refined nature. But I suppose such

crosses are intentional, and so must be borne uncomplainingly, as patience under misconception is such a beautiful thing." And Lady Alicia again sighed her dainty sigh as she rose to take her leave, having effectually succeeded, as was her wont, in preventing those with whom she was conversing from putting their oars in even sideways.

CHAPTER III.

LAURENCE BAXENDALE.

The pride that goes before a fall
Had ruled the master of the Hall.

SOMEWHERE in the middle of the maze of lanes which lay between The Ways and Tetleigh Wood stood an old red farmhouse, sentinelled by a row of poplar trees. From its front windows one could see the stretch of green fields that lay between it and the Wood; and beyond them the distant mountains, which hid from the casual observer the wonderful doings of the setting sun; and from its back windows one could see Baxendale Hall, standing on the top of a green hill and supported by regiments of trees on either side.

It was at this old red house—called Poplar Farm —that Laurence and his mother took up their abode when the second marriage of Lord Portcullis made that nobleman's castle too full (and some people said too warm) to hold them. It belonged to them, being situated on the Baxendale property; and though small, was quite as large an abode as their very limited means permitted to them.

Poplar Farm was about five minutes' walk from Wayside, and propinquity did all that even the late Arthur Hugh Clough himself could reasonably have expected of it for Laurence Baxendale and Nancy Burton. It so happened that they had never become friends until the Baxendales took up their abode at the Farm. In the old days, when the Baxendales lived at the Hall, Nancy had been a small girl whom Laurence may have known by sight, but to whom, so far as he remembered, he had never spoken. In those far-off days—they seemed far off to him, though in fact it was but a short time ago—Laurence had been a quiet boy, reserved and sensitive to a degree, with few acquaintances among boys of his own age and no friends. Even then he gave evidence of a pride which seemed to have been his by birth —pride in the long line of Baxendales, stretching back until it was lost in the dim mist of bygone centuries; pride in the ancestral Hall, whose red bricks and square windows he so much loved; pride even in the family curse which filled him when a child with a most delightful dread, a most fearful joy. As he grew older and found that despite this terrible curse no one grew the penny the worse, he would look back with a smile at the time when he feared to go to bed at night, fully expecting to be burnt alive before morning; yet, for all that, he hugged the ancestral imprecation to his breast as a most cherished possession. But as a boy he chiefly showed his pride to the outside world in what seemed a stud-

ied reserve. Part of this was, no doubt, shyness; but, in addition, he intentionally held aloof from companions of his own age. The Baxendales, even then, were not able to mix much in society, so that, except when he paid a rare visit to Drawbridge Castle, he did not come across boys who by birth were his equals. Yet in spite of his pride and reserve, in spite of his unsociable reticence, he was a refined, well-bred boy, with great capacities for good. For his father he had a passionate love and devotion, and it was his father who chiefly influenced his early years. Lady Alicia was fond of her child, proud of his good looks and distinguished air; but she paid far more attention to his clothes than to his character. She was only one of those women who look on the outward appearance of their darlings, but who never win, or even care to win, their children's confidence. From his father Laurence had inherited two excellent gifts: a quick feeling for the humourous and a strong sense of humour. He seemed instinctively to shrink from anything mean and underhand; a hater of cruelty and naturally disposed to be lenient in his judgments in any matter touching honour, he was pitiless in condemnation, and never would allow mercy to temper justice. Having no companions of his own age, he would have found time hang heavily on his hands but for his love of books; hour after hour did he spend in the magnificent library of the Hall. He would probably have turned into a desultory bookworm, as

his father could not afford to send him to a public school, had not the then vicar of Tetleigh happened to be an admirable scholar. When Laurence grew too advanced for his father, he was sent for three or four hours every day to the Vicarage to be instructed in Latin and Greek and other excellent things. He was a clever boy, and the vicar took the greatest delight in his instruction. His tutor not only laid the foundation of accurate scholarship, but also instilled into him a love for the English classics, cultivating his naturally good taste until it became almost fastidious, and not only taught him the knack of producing passable Latin and Greek verses, but also the art of writing excellent English prose. Nevertheless, Laurence did not grow up a milksop. He had a great love of fresh air, and rode his pony daily, and took long walks in Baxendale Park and the maze of adjacent lanes. Moreover, he had boxing and fencing lessons from the retired sergeant who was engaged at the Grammar School of the neighbouring town of Silverhampton. Wherefore, though slight, he was strong, healthy and active. He had his faults, no doubt, as so many of us have; his pride in his race bred in him a certain tolerant scorn for those of humble birth; his pride in his intellect was accompanied by something like contempt for his less gifted brethren; his finished culture shrank from contact with people whose manners were less perfect than his own. Again, his delicate sensitiveness in all matters affecting honour gradually developed into an

excessive scrupulousness. In his anxiety to avoid anything to which the most exacting moralist could take exception, he invented scruples where none could be fairly said to exist. He was an adept in finding a lion in the path in all matters affecting his own pleasure or advantage, and he elevated conscience to a position of such eminence that it became almost a bogey. With all this he was not a prig; he was saved from that by the quickness with which he saw the ridiculous side of things, and it is only fair to acknowledge that he was as ready to laugh at himself as at another. From the humourous to the pathetic it is only a step, and Laurence had a vein of tenderness and sympathy, which he strove manfully and not unsuccessfully to conceal, but which was evident enough to the few who knew him well. He loved dumb animals, especially horses and dogs, but he was never much at home with children. An only child himself, and avoiding through both pride and shyness the companionship of others, he had lived a more or less solitary boyhood, and knew little and understood less of children. Which, perhaps, accounts for the fact that he quite ignored the short-frocked Nancy and her sister when he met them taking their walks abroad under the protecting wing and vigilant oversight of their governess, and was quite unconscious that their eyes were not only blue but uncommonly bright and pretty. He had a quick eye for the flight of a bird or a cricket ball, but in

things which really matter he was in those days as blind as a bat.

In due course Laurence went to Oxford, having won a postmastership at Merton, thanks to the admirable coaching of the vicar. His father was only able to make him a scanty allowance, so that even with his scholarship he had to lead a very quiet life and to indulge in few luxuries. Yet he enjoyed his college days; better, perhaps, than if he had been able to gratify expensive tastes and frequent frivolous (if not rowdy) society. He read hard, and rode hard, and had plenty of friends of a quiet sort. He had not much difficulty in securing a First in both Moderations and Greats; moreover, he won the Gaisford Prize for Greek Verse, a feat which greatly delighted his quondam tutor, the vicar.

During his last year at Oxford, Laurence made his first real acquaintance with sorrow. His father, whose finances had been straitened for some years, owing to agricultural depression and the extravagance of Lady Alicia, found that he could no longer maintain his position at Baxendale Hall. He decided to move to a small house—but this decision was never carried into effect: grief at leaving his ancestral home broke his heart; and his last days were rendered more wretched by the selfishness of his foolish wife, who was continually bemoaning her hard fate in having to resign the position in the county which was her due. Thus a narrower home than

even the one he had contemplated claimed the broken-hearted man—a home of quietness and peace, where he found rest for his soul.

Mr. Baxendale's death was a terrible blow to Laurence. He had always been devoted to his father, who had made himself a companion and friend to his son. That a time would ever come when that companion and friend should be no more had never occurred to Laurence, and when the blow fell it crushed him. He could not believe at first that it could be true; it seemed to him as though his father had gone on a journey and would soon come back. Then, as he began to realise that it really *was* true, that never again on this earth would he see his father's smile or clasp his father's hand, his faith was staggered. It could not be true that God was a loving Father if He could thus deal with His children. How could He (so Laurence cried in his anguish) permit His creatures to be thus tormented? Why should He have thus cruelly deprived him of his father, in the plenitude of that father's powers, with so much good left undone which he alone, it seemed, could accomplish—so much duty neglected which he alone could fulfil. If God were indeed pitiful and compassionate, why did He permit such misery and unhappiness to innocent men and women? Where was the justice, where was the love of the Creator?

For a time the mystery of pain and of human sorrow and grief overwhelmed Laurence's soul. But

he faced his doubts, and came through the darkness into light at last. It was the remembrance of the father he had lost that was his sheet-anchor in this time of storm-tossed doubt; until he eventually realised the profound truth that the full influence of a man is never felt until his bodily presence has been removed; that, great though the grief may be, yet it is in truest love and divinest knowledge that God sometimes decides that it is expedient for us that our dear ones should go away.

Shortly after his father's death Laurence took his degree. Meanwhile his mother had gone to her brother, Lord Portcullis (whose wife had just died), and had taken charge of his household. As a tutor was required to teach the rising Drawbridge how to shoot, it occurred to the heads of the family that Baxendale might undertake the post. He was not specially attracted by the prospect, but his pockets were so empty that there was room in them for his inclinations as well as his salary; so he was compelled to pocket both, on the same principle that thrifty persons drink inferior tea because they therewith receive a book as a bonus.

Meanwhile the Baxendale estates were managed by an agent; but when the agent had been paid his salary, and the heavy fire insurance which the owner was bound to maintain had been discharged, there was not very much left from the diminished rent-roll. The residue, such as it was, was given to Lady Alicia by her son for her apparel, which was by no means

that of a meek and quiet spirit, but was after a much more expensive, if more effective style.

So time rolled on until Drawbridge was ready for Eton, and as a consequence his cousin's services were no longer required. It so happened at about this time it occurred to Drawbridge's father that Lady Sarah Sassenach had a pretty face and a charming manner. On pursuing the train of thought thus suggested, he began to speculate how the same face would look at the head of his table. On the whole, he came to the conclusion that he should prefer it to his sister's. In his case, for once, the course of true love ran smooth; as a consequence, Lady Alicia, as well as her son, found her occupation gone.

It would have been well for Baxendale if he had withstood the allurements of the immediate income he secured by becoming his cousin's tutor; and instead of devoting such money as he possessed to the decoration of his mother's person, he had spent it on the preparation of himself for the learned profession of the Law.

This at the time had to his scrupulous conscience savoured too much of selfishness; whereas if he had only used common sense, he would have seen that in the long run his mother would have benefited by a temporary restriction in the number and expensiveness of her gowns. But it is so difficult to use a sense that one does not happen to possess; and few of us care to borrow another person's for the occasion—to which minority Laurence did not happen

to belong. As things were now, he had lost precious years; moreover, he had to find a home for his mother, whose exodus from Drawbridge Castle was necessitated by the advent of the new Countess. His opportunity was therefore lost; and as the idea of another tutorship was distasteful to him, he determined to dispense with the services of an agent and manage his estate himself. So he betook himself and his mother to Poplar Farm, which happened to be vacant at the time; and—having learnt much while he was at Drawbridge from his uncle's agent—found himself quite competent to manage his own property. With the salary saved, and the rent of the house occupied by former agents added to his assets, his income was brought up to a few hundreds a year—sufficient for the needs of himself and his mother, but quite inadequate to the introduction of a Mrs. Laurence Baxendale. He tried of course to let the Hall; but it was a large, rambling building, too old-fashioned for the modern merchant-prince; moreover its proximity to the town of Silverhampton was against its being let, as it is a notorious theory—which no amount of fact can controvert—that the surrounding country is as dark as Erebus; although any one who has sojourned in South Mershire knows full well that the much-maligned country is—like a certain distinguished personage—not nearly so black as it is painted.

The management of an estate is a healthful occupation, as was evidenced by the bloom upon Baxen-

dale's face and the easy carriage of his slight but athletic frame. Yet it did not occupy his time to the full. The above mentioned personage is credited—and there are apparently some grounds for the persuasion—with the knack of finding occupation for idle hands. This potentate has many local agents—some paid and some honorary—whom he engages to carry out his designs. On this occasion the vacant post fell to Miss Nancy Burton. Nancy herself was nothing loth to fulfil this useful office. She had an appetite, which would have done credit to Alexander himself, for new worlds which should finally be conquered by her bow and spear. There was nothing of the "little Englander" about Miss Burton; in her policy there was no continent too vast to be annexed, no tribe too unmanageable to be added to her dependencies. Therefore she hailed Laurence Baxendale as one of those unknown yet conquerable spheres for which her great prototype sighed in vain. She was very adaptable, and had no difficulty in charming all with whom she came into contact and in persuading them that they and their concerns were objects of absorbing interest to her. There was no insincerity in this; as long as she was in the company of any person, however dull, her desire to put that particular person at ease, and to find topics of conversation agreeable to him or her, led to this result.

Baxendale was an exceedingly clever man, but unfortunately he had the knack of hiding his light

under the bushel of shyness. Now Nancy did not know what it was to be shy; more than that, she defied any one to be shy when in her company. Wherefore, as the two met not infrequently, she quickly discovered Laurence's abilities, and found to her delight that he was very different from the average man of her acquaintance, whose superabundance of health was more than balanced by a plentiful lack of wit, not to say brains. Like other men, Laurence found it impossible to be shy in her presence, though he still maintained a reserve which Nancy thought as extraordinary as it was unnecessary. Yet they became close friends in spite of scruples and of struggles on the man's part. Nancy did not exactly set her cap at the impecunious owner of Baxendale Hall. But she dearly loved power; and finding (she was exceedingly quick in discerning feelings) the man resisting her influence, she determined that she would conquer his indifference. She had no intention of breaking his heart, still less her own; but she decided that he should be made to care for her sufficiently to satisfy the point of honour, and then he might depart with slightly scorched fingers but otherwise unhurt.

As for Laurence, he began by thinking he disliked Nancy; her very frankness he critically put down to forwardness, her wit he regarded as pertness, her good-humour as casual indifference. But he soon found himself convinced of folly; he began to recognise the charm of this brilliant young woman; to

see that her frankness was the result of absence of self-consciousness, her easy tolerance the perfection of good manners. From this he rapidly progressed to a recognition of the brightness of her wit and the fascination of her strong personality. A day seemed lost if he did not see her; a day appeared well-spent if he had but five minutes of her charming society. Yet, strange to say, the more he was attracted the more reserved he himself became. This puzzled Nancy, who was perfectly aware of his being attracted, and equally conscious of his studied reserve. Laurence himself knew, but he was unable to gratify the girl's natural curiosity. In short, he had fallen in love with Nancy, and his sensitive conscience would not allow him to mention the fact to her. If he had done so nobody would have been more surprised than she.

No one knew what a struggle he had with himself. Day by day as he saw her he fell deeper into the coils. He knew what he was doing; yet he made no effort to escape. He knew that so far as he was concerned Nancy was the only woman in the world, and he accepted this elementary truth without a murmur. Yet his conscience told him that he could never marry her. She was a girl accustomed to walk delicately along the luxurious ways of life; he —with his ancient birth and pride of race—had nothing to offer her but a rambling mansion, with a superb library which the terms of his grandfather's will had made it impossible for him to sell; a large

estate that brought him in a scanty income, made scantier by the fact that this same will stipulated that both Laurence and his father could only succeed to the property on condition that they paid a heavy fire insurance to protect the Hall from the consequences of the old curse. Moreover he had a mother, with by no means inexpensive tastes, to support.

So it came to pass that in his relations with Nancy he was a man of many moods. Sometimes he would yield to the seductive charm of her bright talk. At such moments he would unbend and become his own natural self; he would allow his pleasant vein of humour and natural kindliness of heart full play. Then would Nancy regard him as the most delightful of men. And then, all at once, he would freeze up and become stiff and affected, to Nancy's great astonishment. She would ask—and ask with reason—what she had done or said to justify such a change. But to this Laurence would only reply with stately reserve that she had done and said nothing; and would even deny a reserve which no one felt more strongly than himself. When he was in this mood Nancy thought with some justice that Laurence was the most disagreeable of men, and determined that she would drop his acquaintance. She would perhaps have passed a gentler judgment on the unhappy prisoner at the bar if she had only known that these sudden fits of chilling reserve were simply signs of a devotion and a love which Laurence felt were getting beyond his powers of self-

control. If Nancy at such times was irritated almost beyond measure, it is equally true that the man whom she regarded as absolutely devoid of human feelings was suffering the tortures of a self-made Inquisition which would have put to shame most of the inventions of mediæval Spain.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. CANDY.

A husband, even though a fool,
Teaches far more than any boarding-school.

THE post of caretaker of Baxendale Hall was filled by a worthy couple of the name of Candy. Candy himself had been head-gardener while the house was yet inhabited: and he still pottered about the neglected old garden, picking up a stick here and a weed there, as the fancy took him. His better half was a Norfolk woman; and had been wooed and won at Cromer when Candy was an under-gardener at one of the big houses near that delightful town. She always felt herself to be a stranger and a sojourner in Mershire: for she had left her heart with her two little children in Overstrand churchyard, amid the poppies which keep guard over the slumbers of them that await the great awakening within the sound of the blue North Sea. At least she had left half of her heart there; the other half was filled to overflowing with respectful admiration of her lord and master, who was the greatest and wisest man in the kingdom, according to Mrs. Candy. It is a great satisfaction to every woman to have a final court of appeal for the settlement of all doubtful questions; and it is a still greater satis-

faction to be married to this court. Which blessing was Mrs. Candy's in full measure.

It was a day in the early summer, before the snow-drifts of May blossom had quite melted from off the hedges, when Nancy crossed the fields lying at the back of Wayside and went through the iron gate into the lanes. To her (apparent) surprise whom should she meet there but Mr. Baxendale, who—strange to say—had of late contracted a habit, in common with the elder Miss Burton, of perambulating—nominally in search of exercise—those particular lanes!

"Good afternoon," said Laurence, also trying to show a decorous amount of astonishment at finding Nancy in the very place where he had come to look for her.

"Good afternoon. I was just going to the post-office," explained Nancy, ignoring the impertinent fact that it took twice as long to go thither by the lanes as by the high road.

"So was I," exclaimed Laurence, likewise ignoring the equally impertinent fact that he was walking in precisely the contrary direction; but which of us, who has learned anything at all, has not discovered that very often the shortest way to a place takes us several miles in the opposite way? County Councils would compute distances more accurately than they do if they measured by companions instead of by mile-stones.

So Laurence turned with Nancy and walked be-

side her: which was the only sensible thing to do if he were really aiming at the post-office: he would never have reached it by his original route—at least, not without going right round the world.

"After I have been to the post I want to walk up to Baxendale to speak to Mrs. Candy about something," he continued; "won't you come with me? It is a perfect afternoon for a walk."

"All right," agreed Nancy. (She was a very obliging young woman.) "I am always glad of an excuse to cultivate Mrs. Candy—or, rather, to let Mrs. Candy cultivate me."

"Mrs. Candy certainly repays research."

"Doesn't she? And I always make it my duty and my delight to research her."

"To dig for knowledge out of Mrs. Candy's stores is not an elaborate mining operation," said Laurence drily. "I never met a woman who found it so easy to begin talking and so difficult to stop."

"I never try to stop her: I feed upon every word she says."

"But don't you want to put your own oar in sometimes, Miss Burton? I should have imagined that silence was hardly your favourite rôle."

"Oh! I'm not a great talker."

"Ah! how appearances sometimes deceive," murmured Laurence under his breath.

Nancy laughed: "Well, not such a very great talker: at least, I've met greater ones—once or twice."

"So have I; my dear mother, for instance, and the excellent Mrs. Candy; but that doesn't entirely exonerate you from the charge."

"You are very rude!"

"Indeed, I'm not: I'm exactly the reverse. I don't know which is the greater—my pleasure in the feats of great talkers, or my wonder at how the dickens they do it."

"Then don't you find it easy to talk?"

"By no means. You can't think how often I am on the verge of brain fever through scouring the hidden places of my mind for something to say and finding nothing."

"Poor thing! Now, I never have to scour the hidden places of my mind for something to say."

"So I should have supposed."

"Every drawer and cupboard in my mind is so full of remarks that it simply won't shut; and the more I try to empty it by making the remarks, the fuller it seems to get."

"My envy of you even surpasses my admiration."

"But I know why you find it difficult to talk," remarked Nancy thoughtfully: "it is because you are so reserved, and reserve is the scourge of conversation."

"Ah!"

"I disapprove of reserve on principle," continued Nancy, shaking her head reprovingly; "and I consider it your besetting sin."

Laurence smiled: "Well, then, having diagnosed the complaint, won't you prescribe the remedy?"

"There's no remedy except just not being it—like Nora and me, you know. I tell everybody everything I think and feel; and that makes everybody comfortable and at home, don't you know?"

"Yes; naturally it would have that effect."

"And it makes people like you if you are unreserved," added Nancy wisely; "I've noticed that. Reserved people are never popular, because they are always inviting you to a mental Barmecide feast; the dishes and plates are put before you with nothing on them, and you have only to pretend to eat. When you talk to reserved people there is all the outward show of actual conversation, but the dishes and plates are really empty and it is all a sham."

"That sounds very pretty. But it depends a little, does it not, on the nature of your thoughts and feelings, as to whether their publication would add to your popularity? In your case, no doubt, it would: but in mine—'I doubt it, said the carpenter, and shed a bitter tear'! Indeed, I put down any little popularity I may possess (small enough it is, goodness knows!) to the fact that people know so little of me. The more they knew my sentiments the more they would dislike me, I take it. Wherefore my reserve is perhaps as clever as your unreserve, Miss Burton. I can't pay it a higher compliment, can I?"

"Not a bit of it! That just shows how ignorant you are. If you are an angel and hide it, nobody

will be really fond of you. I don't believe any one was ever really fond of an angel unawares. Angels unawares are esteemed but never loved; and it is a most uninteresting part to play."

"Perhaps."

These short answers of Mr. Baxendale's always irritated Nancy, as much as so good-tempered a young woman was capable of irritation. She was never quite sure whether he was laughing at her or with her—a most disquieting doubt. Neither, as a matter of fact, was he; she could hardly be blamed for not understanding him, when as yet he did not understand himself.

"Now, on the contrary, if you are a devil and say so," she continued, "everybody will be charmed with you, and think it is so sweet and dear of you to be so outspoken."

"Possibly."

"If I had wings and covered them, people would only say what a bad figure I had and how badly my clothes fitted: but if I had a cloven foot and went barefoot, everybody would smile, and pity rather than blame; and if I went to the length of putting my feet on the table, the world would end by thinking them quite pretty, and pointed toes would entirely go out of fashion."

"Which shows that truth—like water—no longer lies at the bottom of a well, but is turned on to every house—in an unlimited supply—by certificated water-works. What an enlightened age we live in,

and how thankful we ought to be to the goodness and the grace which smiled upon our birth with so subtle a sense of humour!"

Again that sense of irritation crept over Nancy. But she refused to be baulked by it, and continued bravely: "All English people are too reserved; it is the principal national fault."

"So you think foreign nations have more attractive shop-windows?"

"Rather! Well, you know how awfully difficult English girls are to talk to when first you are introduced?"

"I do; by most bitter and most exhaustive—not to say exhausting—experience."

"Well, foreign girls aren't, simply because they are less reserved. I remember once, when we were in London, some Mexican people came to call upon us who had had dealings with father in business; and my heart sank when they were shown in, as I hadn't an idea what to say to them."

"Even you?"

"Yes, even me. It fell to my lot to talk to the daughter, a very handsome girl; so I began by asking, 'Have you any sisters?' A feeble opening, but the best I could think of on the spur of the moment."

"And what did she say?"

"Oh! she was delightful." And Nancy bubbled over with laughter at the remembrance. "She said, 'Yes, I have two sisters: and I will tell you all our

love-affairs, and then you will feel that you know us thoroughly.' Wasn't it killing?' "

"Charmingly so. And what did she tell you?" In spite of all his resolutions not to grow too fond of her, Laurence never could resist the temptation to bring the laughter into Nancy's blue eyes.

"She said, 'In England you do not know how to love: you are too cold, and you have too much to interest you. In Mexico a woman has nothing to amuse her but to go to mass and to get married: but in England you have so much to amuse you that you have not time to do either of these."

"There is some truth in that," declared Laurence.

"There is. Then she went on, 'Now, in Mexico we do know how to love: and we always love a man who has no money.' I said I had known cases of that kind even in England." And Nancy looked slyly at Laurence through her long eyelashes, to see what effect this announcement had upon him.

But Laurence's heart was not within measureable distance of his sleeve, so he enquired stolidly: "Well, and what did the Mexican lady say to that?"

"She said, 'But we are very bad in Mexico; and when we find that the man is so poor that we cannot marry him, we fret and fret till we are quite ill; and the doctor says to our parents that we shall die unless they give us the money to marry this man. So then our parents give us the money, and we marry him, and are quite well.' "

"A most satisfactory conclusion," said Laurence piously: "and had the lady herself suffered in this fashion?"

"No; but her sister had. She told me, 'My sister was like that till my parents did give her the money to marry the man she loved; and now she writes to us that she used to have pains all over the body, but that now she has not a single pain in any limb.' So they know how to manage their affairs in Mexico, don't they, Mr. Baxendale?" And again Nancy looked through her eyelashes to discover the effect of this remark.

Again Laurence was equal to the glance: "So it seems."

"Don't you think we'd better do the post-office on our way back?" suggested Nancy, after a few moments' silent meditation upon the density of men in general and of Laurence in particular.

"Of course we had; what a happy idea! And now we can go straight to the Hall by the lanes and up the Park without getting the dust of the high-road on our feet at all."

So the two young people threaded their way along the green bye-roads and then across the undulating park, till they reached the imposing front door which was crowned by the arms of the Baxendales; and as they went they talked by the way of all the trifling matters which are of no moment in themselves, but are of such absorbing importance in the mouth of

the one person whose prerogative it is to turn life's smallest coins into gold and earth's commonest corners into Paradise.

Mrs. Candy gave them a hearty welcome. It was somewhat lonely up at Baxendale Hall, and the worthy matron was truly thankful when any listener chanced to come her way.

"I hope you enjoyed the village tea-meeting, Mrs. Candy," said Nancy, after Laurence had transacted his business with his caretaker; "I thought you seemed to be having a good time."

Mrs. Candy put her hands upon her hips, and considered for a moment; then she replied in the refined voice and with the clear-cut accent which are characteristic of all East-Anglians: "Well, Miss Burton, I wean't deceive yew. When I comes into Tetleigh school-room, I spreedes my hankyshire on my knees, and I looks up to see what there was t'eat."

"You considered the menu, in short," suggested Laurence.

"Precisely so, sir," replied Mrs. Candy, not in the least knowing what he meant, and so agreeing with him all the more readily; "well, when I looks up and sees nothin' but maunch-cake and buttered buns, I says to myself, says I, 'The Lord's will be done; if I must be ill, I must.' So I takes both."

"I hope your resignation was rewarded," said Laurence.

"It were, sir, it were."

"And how are you to-day after it all?" Nancy asked.

Mrs. Candy shook her head: "Sadly, miss, very sadly. It's wind in the head, miss, wind in the head, and I'll tell yew how that happened. I was a-waiting on Mrs. Betts down at The Ways tew year come Michaelmas, and she was a paralytic, if you remember, miss."

"I remember her quite well; and I am bound to confess I never knew any one get so much pleasure out of paralysis as she did. She enjoyed to the full the minute description of every symptom."

"Well, miss, I was a-waitin' on her; and when she was a-comin' down stairs and a-leanin' on me, her feet slipped and she dreeve her elba' inta my side, and that dreeve the wind inta my head. So when I went to see t' doctor, he says to me, says he, 'My gude wumman,' says he, 'yew should ha' come to me when that furst happened; now,' says he, 'I can't du nothin'; that there wind have got inta yewr head,' he says, 'and it'll never come down, no, never no more.' That's what t' doctor says, miss, and that's what's t' matter wi' me."

Nancy endeavoured to look as sympathetic as she was expected to look. "I am so sorry, Mrs. Candy; it must be a most uncomfortable feeling."

"It is, indeed, miss; and my poor feyther was just the same. Wind in the head is in our family, it is, from livin' so near the sea, and all them terrible gales. And Uncle Willum was bad just the same,

tew. I remember when Uncle Willum was bad. Aunt Selina, she says to me, 'Lizzie,' says she, 'I du wish as yewr uncle wud go one way or t'other; he do burn such a sight o' candle, and me rubbin' him up and down all the night wi' them imprecations.'"

"Did he finally recover?" asked Laurence politely.

"Not he, sir, not he: recoverin' is not in our family," replied Mrs. Candy, with slightly ruffled dignity; and Laurence felt that he had made a mistake. "At t' end I went t' help Aunt Selina to nurse him. I give him his medicine at tew o'clock, and he trew it up; I give him his medicine at three o'clock, and he trew it up; give him his medicine at four o'clock, and he trew it up; at five o'clock he lay like a cabbage, and at six o'clock he went off like a bird."

"Dear me, how sad!" exclaimed Laurence; while Nancy looked out of the window to hide her emotion, which unfortunately was not of the right sort.

"And my childern were just the same," continued Mrs. Candy, inflated with the pride of race; "there wasn't one of 'em healthy—not one; and they all died afore they was turned five."

"Oh! I am so sorry," exclaimed Nancy, who was really sympathetic now. "How you must miss them!"

"I du, miss. I misses 'em and I wants 'em; but I misses 'em more than I wants 'em. They're a sight o' trouble, childern are; especially when they've wind in the head."

"But Candy looks strong enough," suggested Nancy, by way of consolation; "he must be a comfort to you."

Candy's spouse cheered up at once. "Eh! he's a wunnerful man, Candy is: I never knew his like for eatin' roley-poley pudden—never since I was born. T'other day Mrs. Fairfax sent us a roley-poley pudden up from The Ways: and when we sits down t'eat it, Candy says, says he, 'May the Lord bless this here pudden to my soul, and them as was the instigators of it.' And he eats it up every scrap. Eh! but he's a wunnerful man, Candy is, and he thinks a sight o' pudden, and has done iver since I first kep' company wi' him."

"A not inexplicable taste," said Laurence.

"I remember onst he was iver so put out at a village dinner in Tetleigh school-room, twenty year ago come next Christmas. There was roley-poley pudden, and Candy got a good slice. But—wud yew believe it, sir?—they give him his slice stark naked, with not a scrap o' jam, nor even o' syrup, to cover it. Oh, he was put about, Candy was, and no wonder."

"Where did you first meet him?" Nancy asked.

"Well, he were a gardener at Cromer Hall when I was in service at Overstrand. I had lots o' lovers in those days, bein' as I was tall, wi' a nice pink colour; and Candy he came courtin' me."

"And I suppose of all your lovers you liked him the best."

"Well, miss, I can't say exactly that; there was several as I liked quite as well as he, him never havin' been much of a one to look at."

"Then why did you finally choose him?"

"Well, miss, though Candy was never much of a one to look at, I heard he was notable at cooking—the notablest man at cooking in all them parts. So I picked him: and I keeps him up to it, I can tell yew."

Laurence smiled: "A most wise choice, Mrs. Candy! I think of selecting a wife along the same lines. But what did the rejected lovers do? Did they fling themselves and their broken hearts wholesale into the sea?"

Mrs. Candy bridled: "Well, sir, only tew days after I'd fixed on Candy, who should come a-courtin' me but Fison, him that was coachman up at t' Hall? And a much finer man he was than Candy, bein' better set up all round."

"Then, I suppose, in true feminine fashion, you rejected your choice, and expressed your readiness to exchange the small bird in your hand for the larger one just emerging from the bush."

"Well, sir, I says to Fison, 'Fison,' says I, 'I'm real sorry as I can't keep company wi' yew, yew bein' such a fine, well-set up man all round. But yew've come a day tew late; I'm bespoke."

"And how did Fison take the blow?"

"Well, sir, Fison says, says he, 'Lizzie,' he says, 'I'm rare sorry as I've come tew late; but there's as good fish in the sea as iver came out of it; and p'r'aps

yew won't mind lookin' out for a nice girl for me, as there's no one as knows as well as yew ezactly what wud suit me.' "

"Did you look out for one?" asked Nancy; "I don't believe I should have done so, in your place. I think it is horrid when one's lovers fall in love with somebody else, even if one hasn't cared for them."

But Mrs. Candy was not made of such slight elements as Nancy. "In course I did, and found one just to his taste. A bright girl she was, Peggy Postern by name, our sexton's daughter, and one as had been the life of many a funeral in our parts. Eh! but she was a merry girl, Peggy was; and she attended every one of the funerals in Overstrand churchyard. I never knew such a girl for pleasure: if there was anythin' goin' on, she must be in it, must Peggy; and she'd go to the poorest funeral rather than stay quietly at home. Half a loaf's better than no bread, she used to say when I passed the remark that a funeral wi' no mournin' coaches wasn't no better than no funeral at all."

"Miss Postern seems to have been somewhat of a philosopher," remarked Mr. Baxendale; but he had not time to say any more before Mrs. Candy went on: "But I was a-tellin' yew about Candy when he come courtin' me. He never wud walk intimate wi' me—arm in arm, yew knows—because he said as it looked soft-like to show as yew was that gone on a wumman; and I thought it looked soft-like for a wumman to keep company wi' a man as wasn't that gone on

her. But I just made no fuss, but bided my time. It never will du no good to make a fuss wi' a man: if yew just waits and lets him have his own way, he'll punish hisself in time."

"And did Candy punish himself?"

"He did, miss. For when we comes to a stile, with nobody a-lookin' on, Candy he says, says he, 'My lass!' he says, 'I'll help yew over this.' 'No,' says I, 'if yew won't walk intimate when folks is a-lookin' and there's some credit in it, yew shan't help me over stiles when there's nobody by.' And I never let him—not once—till we was married; though he went on his bended knees, he did, about it. Eh! but he's a notable man, is Candy, for hidin' his feelings when folks is by and showin' 'em when they're no credit to nobody."

Nancy thoroughly sympathised with the speaker. "How awfully trying! It would make me simply furious if I'd a husband that behaved like that."

"It's tryin', as yew say, miss; but most things is trying in this world, and so they're meant to be, for some wise purpose which we don't understand now, and maybe niver shall. But it's the queer ways o' men that give yew somethin' to think about, when it's bad weather and yew've no neighbours droppin' in whiles. Why, I'd as soon be an old maid wi' a stuffed canary bird as have a husband as was as easy to see through as another wumman. That's the bewty o' married life; yew can never tell what your

man'll do next nor what mischief he'll be up tu—no, not even if you've got such a man as Candy to deal with. But yew know as whatever he does it'll turn out for the best."

"Come upstairs," said Laurence to Nancy, "and have a look at the library. I happen to have the key in my pocket."

"Do you always keep it locked up?" she asked as she followed him up the wide oak staircase.

"Yes; always. I don't want to have good Mrs. Candy pottering about with a candle among all those priceless old books. The house is insured for a hundred thousand pounds, and the value lies chiefly in the library; the rest of the furniture isn't worth much."

"A hundred thousand pounds? What a lot of money!"

"Oh! the library is worth far more; in fact, some of the prints and first editions are practically priceless. I am strictly forbidden by my grandfather's will to sell a single book or print, or to lessen the amount of the insurance. But it seems a lot, as you say, and especially when I have to pay for it out of my already very limited income."

And then Laurence unlocked the massive oak door, and spent a delightful hour in showing Nancy some of his rare treasures.

"I did not know you were so fond of old books," he said as they walked home together.

"Oh! I simply revel in them. I should like to spend a month in that library, and never put my nose out-of-doors the whole time."

"If you would really like it I could let you have a key to the library, and then you could go and sit there whenever you wished."

Nancy's eyes sparkled with delight. "How sweet of you! I should simply adore it."

"Then you shall have one with pleasure; and I'll lend you a key of the house as well, so that if Mrs. Candy happens to be out and the house locked up you can still go in and up to the library. Only be careful to lock it all up again after you."

"Oh! I'll be careful, awfully careful, I promise."

"Then that's all right," replied Laurence, experiencing a thrill of delight at having it in his power to give Nancy pleasure.

And he delivered the two keys into her hands that very day.

CHAPTER V.

ANTHONY'S SUGGESTION.

What is greater than the king?—
Perfect knowledge of a thing.
What than state is more immense?—
Of a surety, common sense.

All the next day Nancy went about singing and making melody in her heart.

There is something strangely delightful in the beginning of anything—in the early dawn of fresh joy, while the new-born interest is as yet too nebulous to have attached to itself the inevitable cares and responsibilities which cannot fail to come later; when the object of our regard is already dear enough to make us happy by being present, but not yet sufficiently dear to make us miserable by going away. A land "where everlasting spring abides" means something far more than eternally green fields and budding trees; it means a land where disillusionment can never brush away the dew of the morning, and where the pearly haze of dawn shall never be dispersed. "Behold! I make all things new!" does not prophesy that once and for all the house not made with hands shall be refurnished according to the latest improvements; nay, it rather foretells that the mystic glad-

ness of spring and of morning shall no longer be the transient delight which now it is, but shall become a part of that everlasting joy which shall one day crown the heads of those who are counted worthy to attain unto it.

The first dawn of love was just now transfiguring the world for Nancy Burton. Later on the sorrow came which is the inseparable companion of all earthly bliss; but at present Laurence appeared to her as the embodiment of human happiness. In later days she laughed bitterly at the remembrance of how marvellously happy she believed she was going to be, before disappointment had taught her how little it is wise to expect from life: but as yet all things were hers, because she was gradually making the wonderful discovery—that discovery whereby the most ordinary mortals for once in their life throw Columbus into the shade—that she loved and was loved in return.

Possibly if the immortal Christopher had penetrated a little further into the future—if he had foreseen the horror of the great American war for which he was paving the way—he would have turned his galleon round and gone ingloriously home again: and, in the same way, if all the women who make the other great discovery could perceive what heart-burnings and heart-rendings they were thereby preparing for themselves, they, too, would turn affrighted from the unknown land. But if Columbus had seen further still—if he had seen the mighty

kingdom which was to grow up on the farther shore of that sea of blood, filling the earth with its knowledge and glory, he would have gone on rejoicing and unafraid: and, likewise, if those fond souls who are preparing for their own footsteps the sorrowful way could see the very end of the road, they, too, would go hopefully forward, knowing that only such as have sown in tears shall reap the full joy of the eternal harvest.

Nancy was too happy to stay indoors, so she walked down in the morning to Ways Hall to see Faith. On her way she met Lady Alicia.

"Good morning, dear Miss Burton," said her ladyship, in whom the neighbourly spirit had not yet evaporated: "may I turn and walk with you? I am taking my daily constitutional, which I always think is so very, very necessary if one wishes to be kept in health; and health is so very beautiful, don't you think?"

"I don't know about its being beautiful: but it is very jolly," Nancy replied, trying hard to remember that Lady Alicia was Laurence's mother, and therefore not meet to be made fun of.

"And illness is very beautiful, too," Lady Alicia went on: "I often think that thinness and the hectic flush suggest such touching and elevating thoughts. I always wish that it had been my lot to be thrown with people whose illnesses were beautiful and improving to the character. But my poor dear husband's were quite the reverse."

"Tell me about him," besought Nancy, whose thirst for information regarding the house of Baxendale was hourly increasing.

"Oh! there is nothing to tell you, my dear; he was quite a prosaic and commonplace character, so different from me, who am simply overflowing with poetry and romance. I often think what a pathetic picture it must have been to see a highly-strung, sensitive young girl like myself tied to a hard-headed, hard-hearted man, such as Mr. Baxendale."

"But are you sure that he was as hard-hearted as he seemed? Often people appear unfeeling when they are only shy and reserved, and all the time that they seem so cold they are suffering most intensely."

Lady Alicia drew herself up: "My dear, of course I am sure. Is it likely that a man's own wife could not understand him? And, besides, Mr. Baxendale was a very easy person to understand; he wasn't complex as I am, but just straightforward and matter-of-fact, with—I am sorry to say—a sad habit of making fun of things."

"I am afraid that is rather a weakness of mine," remarked Nancy humbly.

"Then, my dear, struggle against it and suppress it at all costs. To my mind there is nothing so vulgar as a sense of humour; it coarsens the finest natures and throws a horrible, amusing light upon things which in themselves are quite beautiful and serious. And I always think it is so elevating to take life seri-

ously—a thing which my dear husband seemed constitutionally unable to do; and I fear poor Laurence is not much better."

Before Nancy had time to take up the cudgels on Laurence's behalf, she and Lady Alicia had reached the door of Ways Hall; but all the same, her heart was hot within her as she realised how completely his mother misunderstood him, and she longed passionately to make up to him in some way for all that he had missed in life. Suddenly she realised—by what means she could not say—how much the sensitive father and son had been to each other, and what a terrible blank the death of his father had left in the life of Laurence Baxendale.

When women of the Nancy Burton type admire a man, they are fairly safe: it is only when they begin to pity him that their hearts are in jeopardy.

Mrs. Fairfax and Faith were sitting out on the verandah at the back of the house, and their visitors joined them there. The verandah at Ways Hall was quite an institution. Faith and her mother principally lived in it for the greater part of the year. It occupied the whole length of the house on the south side, and had a stone roof supported by handsome stone pillars. Each end was of glass, lined with rows of rare plants in pots; so that there was no admittance to any manner of wind save a south one; while all the sunshine in the garden collected itself in the verandah, as cream collects itself at the top of a

can of milk. Therefore there were few days in the year when the verandah at Ways Hall was not suitable for habitation.

Mrs. Fairfax and Faith loved their garden; and in return their garden educated them as only well-loved gardens can educate men and women. The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches find a powerful antidote in a garden; for those who abide near the heart of Nature learn from her lessons of peace and patience which she does not teach to her more bustling children. Now, as of old, the Lord God walks in the garden in the cool of the day and communes with them who have ears to hear; and well for those who hearken unto His voice as it speaks to them through the trees of the garden and the flowers of the field of laws that cannot be broken and of promises that must be fulfilled!

"I have made a new fernery," said Mrs. Fairfax, after she had greeted her visitors in her old-world manner and Faith had carried Nancy off for a girlish confabulation, "and I wish you to see it, Alicia, when you have rested awhile."

"Oh, how delightful!" exclaimed Lady Alicia; "to my mind there are few things more beautiful and suggestive than ferns. They always seem to me like graceful women who have charm rather than actual beauty; and there is nothing more interesting than charm, don't you think?—so attractive and yet so elusive."

"I have arranged that all the water from the gar-

den should drain into the fernery and so run into the lake," continued Mrs. Fairfax.

Lady Alicia and the mistress of Ways Hall always enjoyed a conversation with each other—for the good reason that each talked of her own concerns, utterly regardless of what the other was saying; which resulted in the equal satisfaction of both.

"And flowers are suggestive, too," Lady Alicia went on. "I once had a beautiful idea that it would be so sweet for people to try and copy the flowers which grow in the month when their birthdays are."

"It has the same effect as a dropping-well; the water trickles down a rockery covered with ferns and forms itself into a stream at the bottom."

"That is why I am always so much interested to find out in what month people's birthdays fall; then I know what type of character they should aim at. And it is so sweet to have an aim in life, I think; it gives one something to think of in the winter evenings and on Sundays."

"And over the stream I have built a rustic wooden bridge; it is extremely pretty now, and will be far more so when the creepers which I have trained over it are fully grown."

"My birthday, you see, is in October; and I have always tried to copy chrysanthemums by dressing in those sweet art shades, and by showing myself a friend for dark and cold days rather than for sunny ones. That is so touching in chrysanthemums, I think: they come just when one is sad and lonely

and the bedding-out plants are all gone. And that is such a beautiful allegory of friendship—to visit people when they are in trouble rather than in their prosperous days."

"I am not sure whether I shall be able to keep some of the ferns out-of-doors all the winter; I fear it would be a risk for those that I brought from abroad, and even for some of those that came from Devonshire. You see, the frosts here are somewhat severe."

"I remember when dear Mildred Swain married her curate—such a sweet young man, with a lovely complexion and no money, just like a girl!—I proposed a month's visit to them immediately in their dear little home; and I took my maid with me to show that their being poor made no difference to me."

"Exactly what a chrysanthemum would have done in the circumstances," remarked Mrs. Fairfax, for the first time paying attention to what her companion was saying.

Her ladyship smiled complacently: jokes were things undreamed of in her philosophy. "My dear Emilia, how quickly you grasp an idea! You and I always have so much in common!"

Mrs. Fairfax laughed. In her day she had been a greater beauty than her friend, and Lady Alicia's little elegancies were completely lost upon her.

"Then," continued the latter, "I think it is so nice for people whose birthdays are in April to cultivate

humility and try to copy the dear little modest violets."

"What nonsense, Alicia! If there is one virtue more objectionable than another, that virtue is humility. It is a most tiresome and aggravating attribute."

Lady Alicia fairly gasped: "My dear Emilia!"

"I mean what I say. There are no people who give so much trouble in the world as the unassuming, deprecating people: their humility is far more aggressive in reality than the conceit of the most conceited."

"But, dear, dear Emilia, think how beautiful true humility is, and how altogether sweet and Christian."

"I don't care; I simply detest it. The conceited person calls upon you, and comes in and bores you for a quarter of an hour, and that is the end of him: but the deprecating person rings the bell and won't come in, and so you have to go and talk to him in the hall; which is always a most wearisome thing to do."

"But don't you think we should rather look at the spirit which prompts an action than at the action itself? I always endeavour to do so; it seems to make life so much more beautiful and full of meaning."

"My dear Alicia, it is the actions and not the meanings that give trouble to other people."

"Still, we should always endeavour to enter into

another person's feelings, and to look at things from another's point of view."

"Then the other person should likewise try to enter into our feelings, and look at things from our point of view: and if he did, he would quickly discover that his humility is not a matter of sufficient importance to entail any trouble on the part of persons to whom his spiritual vicissitudes are incidents of supreme indifference."

Lady Alicia sighed profoundly: "Alas! how hard you are. Had you my delicate and refined nature, you would enter into the feelings of those dear, human, sensitive plants, and admire, instead of abusing, their modesty."

"Extremely humble people always have a little tickling cough, you will notice; and if there is one thing that irritates me more than another, it is a little tickling cough. Yet I never met a truly unassuming person without one."

Lady Alicia was busy preparing a suitable platitude whereby to silence the doubting spirit of her friend, when the two girls joined their elders.

"Faith and I are regretting that to-morrow is Sunday," exclaimed Nancy, sinking into a seat: "we were planning a picnic without thinking, and suddenly the Sabbath rose up and hit us full in the face."

"Ah, I, too, find Sunday rather a dull and depressing day," said Lady Alicia plaintively; "but I always try to observe it for the servants' sake. It is so bad

for them to see people of our class enjoying themselves upon a Sunday; so I always stretch a point in order to make the day as dull as possible. And, after all, there is something very English and suggestive in a dull Sunday: it makes one feel like a Radical or a Roman Catholic, or something dreadful of that sort, if one does anything amusing on a Sunday afternoon."

"I heard of a lovely new Sunday game the other day," remarked Nancy, with a dangerous demureness, her love of mischief exorcising for the moment her sense of the relationship between Lady Alicia and Laurence.

"What was that, my dear?" asked Mrs. Fairfax, who enjoyed Nancy's jokes only one degree less than Lady Alicia's reception of them. The proverbial duck's back, clothed in a mackintosh, to make assurance doubly sure, would be less impervious to water than was Lady Alicia's consciousness to anything in the shape of humour.

"First of all the men went to one end of the room and all the girls to the other; and the girls were Christians and the men were heathens."

"That sounds Sunday enough," said Faith.

"It is beautiful, dear child, quite beautiful," agreed Lady Alicia; "to my mind there is something very touching and picturesque about heathens and people of that sort. I always think of them standing under palm trees on the edge of a river, looking as if they were just going to bathe. I remember once saying

to Laurence that the Serpentine on a summer's evening reminded me of missionary magazines. I thought it a most beautiful and poetical simile, but Laurence merely laughed, though I had not the least intention of being amusing; but he has unfortunately no eye for the allegorical and suggestive."

Mrs. Fairfax's handsome dark eyes twinkled: "Go on about the Sunday game, my dear," she said.

"Well, the object of the game was to induce the heathens to embrace Christianity."

"Good gracious, child, what will you say next?" exclaimed Mrs. Fairfax. But she laughed all the same.

Not so Lady Alicia: "Ah, how sweet and beautiful —and just what should be done in everyday life. I think it would be so nice if all nations—even the Boers and the Chinese and dreadful people of that kind—were to embrace Christianity. It might steady them down a bit, don't you know? and make war quite a pleasure instead of a pain. There is nothing so really soothing and improving as Christianity: I know for my part, it makes me feel so contented and pleased with myself all Monday and Tuesday if I have made an effort and walked to church and back on Sunday morning."

At tea that afternoon Nancy regaled her always appreciative family circle with a graphic account, which did not lose anything in the telling (Nancy's tales never did), of how Lady Alicia had received the story of the Sunday game.

ANTHONY SAT UPRIGHT IN HIS CHAIR, AND GAZED THOUGHTFULLY AT HIS COUSIN.

"After all," remarked Anthony, when their laughter had subsided, "it must be rather a tight fit for Baxendale to be always obliged to keep a tame mother like that hanging about the premises. If I'd a mother of that kind I should try to get her received into an orphan home or a shoeblack brigade, or some other similar charitable institution which would take the sweet creature off my hands."

"She must be a trial to him," added Nora, "because Mr. Baxendale is so clever himself. Mr. Arbuthnot was saying only yesterday that he thought, taking him all round, Laurence Baxendale was the cleverest person he had ever met."

Anthony sat upright in his chair and gazed thoughtfully at his cousin: "So our dear young vicar is beginning to take people all round, is he? I shall have to keep my paternal eye open, or else he will be taking you all round, my beloved Nora; and then what will mamma and the parish say?"

"Tony, don't be an idiot;" and Nora blushed so becomingly that it was a pity there was no man but a relation to see it.

"Can't help it, my love: we are all idiots in our family; it is too late to change, as the man said when he got home and found he had received twenty shillings for half-a-sovereign."

"Well, anyhow I wish you wouldn't start foolish gossip about me and the vicar," expostulated Nora.

"*Mens conscia recti*—a mind conscious of the rector—(only in this case it is the vicar, but the princi-

ple is the same)- –is independent of, because superior to, parochial gossip," murmured Anthony.

Nora changed the subject, returning to her original muttons: "Mr. Baxendale was considered an awful swell up at Oxford, Faith says; he passed all his examinations splendidly."

"Examinations," remarked Anthony pensively, "are considered, by the unitiated, to be a method of discovering the ignorances of the examined: but the initiated recognise them as a means of displaying the pedantries of the examiner."

"Mr. Baxendale has lots of things to bother him," said Nancy: "of course his mother is a trial; and then he is so frightfully poor. I think it is having to pay such an enormous fire insurance that pinches them so."

"Do they pay such a big insurance?" Nora asked: "how horrid!"

"As far as I can make out," replied Nancy, "they have insured the house and the books and the whole concern for a hundred thousand pounds. How much a year would they have to pay for that, Tony?"

"I can't tell exactly, as they'd insure the house and the furniture and the books and the pictures separately: but I should think it would tote up to something between a hundred and a hundred and fifty a year."

"That's a lot for people who have only about five hundred a year to begin with, isn't it?"

"It is, my dear Nancy. If I were friend Baxen-

dale, I'd chuck the whole concern, and pocket my entire income myself, such as it is."

"But he can't, you see," Nancy explained; "it's put in the entail, or something of that kind, that the library is part of the estate and may not be broken up or sold; and that every Baxendale who inherits the property shall go on with the full fire insurance, because of that old prophecy. The tradition says that Baxendale Hall should be burned down 'First by the King and then by the State;' and so it has been. So the last part is sure to come true also, and the Baxendales have to be prepared for that."

"And it has got to be burned the third time by something 'which is thrice as great' as the King and the State, and 'a thousandfold stronger and higher.' I wonder what that will be," said Nora.

"Common sense, I should think," replied her cousin; "if I were Baxendale, I should quietly put a match to the family roof-tree when nobody was looking, and so save the annual hundred and fifty, and pocket the hundred thousand pounds in addition."

Nora laughed. "Oh! Tony, what an idea!"

"It is a very good one."

"But if Mr. Baxendale did such a thing he'd be punished by law," persisted Nora.

"Of course he would, if he was found out, my dear child: but that would be a mistake on his part. He should just light a cigarette in the charming old library and throw away the match, and the thing is done."

"Really, Tony, what nonsense you do talk!" exclaimed Nancy.

"And if his maternal parent was included in the ruins thereof it would be a benefit to the whole neighbourhood," added Anthony: "excepting that burned goose-quills make such a horrid smell."

And then he went on to talk—equally foolish—of other things, forgetting his suggestion of arson as soon as it was uttered.

But Nancy did not forget: she was not cast in the forgetful mould.

CHAPTER VI.

RUFUS WEBB.

O Lord, I knew Thou were austere;
And so my heart was filled with fear,
And dared not count Thy creatures dear
In awe of Thy great name:
And if my terror of Thy rod
Has left my heart a lifeless clod,
Untouched by love for man or God,
Dread Lord, am I to blame?

"I HAVE no patience with Alicia Baxendale," said Mrs. Fairfax to her daughter that same afternoon.

"Why not, mother?"

"She talks so much nonsense."

"She does; but if it is any pleasure to her, I don't see why she shouldn't. She has precious little pleasure in her life, poor thing!"

"Not at all. She has a good son, and that is pleasure enough for any woman," argued Mrs. Fairfax, who had never quite forgiven Faith for having been born a girl instead of a boy: a youthful error which it is difficult to rectify in after life.

"But, mother, think of coming to live in that little farm-house after being mistress of Baxendale Hall and then of Drawbridge Castle!"

"Humph! That was a come-down, I admit."

"And she really bears it beautifully. It is always

horrid to be poor; and most especially for a woman brought up as Lady Alicia was."

"Well, it is a great deal her own fault that she and Laurence are so poor now. If she had been less extravagant when she was first married, poor Alwyn would not have lived beyond his income as he did."

"Still, it wasn't altogether her own fault that she was extravagant. Remember the way in which she was brought up."

"Really, Faith, the way you have of always sticking up for the absent is most aggravating! I believe if any one said that the devil himself was not altogether a nice character, you'd find some excuse for him in the way he was brought up."

Faith smiled her sweet smile: "But as a matter of fact he was brought up among the angels; so I'm afraid I couldn't find much excuse for him on that score."

"Well, then, you'd say he had been too well brought up, which comes to the same thing nowadays. By the way, what are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I'm going to see Mr. Webb and to take him some flowers."

"You are a wonderful woman, Faith; you are always doing something for somebody else's happiness. I wonder if you ever think of your own, my child."

"It doesn't do much good thinking of one's own," replied Faith rather wistfully. She did not consider it necessary to add that hers was bound up in Laurence Baxendale; and that the truth was slowly dawn-

ing upon her that his, in turn, was bound up in Nancy Burton.

There is a good deal of "setting to corners" in this world.

"You would have made an ideal clergyman's wife," continued her mother reflectively; "you are energetic and capable and amiable and unselfish, and you have not the ghost of an idea how to dress yourself or to do your hair."

Faith only laughed.

"Unmarried women with energy," Mrs. Fairfax went on, "remind me of those horrid motor-cars, which, when some unforeseen obstacle stops their career, have no power of standing still, but plough up the earth all around them and dig their own graves. There are scores of single women in England digging their own graves with wasted and unappropriated energy."

"I am afraid there are, mother; but it isn't altogether their own fault, poor things!" And Faith left the room with a sigh.

Rufus Webb, for whom Faith had designed her flowers, lived alone in a little, white, gabled house in the lanes leading from The Ways to fairyland; but the gates of this latter were forever closed to him. Those who have once heard these gates shut-to behind them can never enter that magic territory again; but for them—as for all of us—there is still prepared some better country, which shall forever cast fairyland into the shade: a country of green pastures and

living waters, and cities whose foundations are of jasper and gold: in short, a country whereof fairyland at its best is but a type and an image, where we shall find as abiding realities the things of which in fairyland we only dreamed.

Rufus was a big, red-haired and red-bearded man of about fifty. Originally he had been a missionary; but the great tragedy which spoiled his life had likewise cut short his career; and now he lived in the cottage at The Ways as a guide, philosopher and friend to all the poor people for miles around. He had a certain knowledge of medicine, which he had studied in his missionary days, and which he had practised successfully among his Chinese converts: and this knowledge he exercised for the benefit of all the cottagers in the neighbourhood, who were too poor to employ a doctor on their own account and too proud to do so at the expense of the parish. But he never preached now, nor had he done so since he left China, twenty years ago. He had passed condemnation upon himself as unfit for God's ministry, and no arguments could induce him to take up his sacred office again.

He was a man subject to terrible fits of religious depression and spiritual anguish when he believed that the heavens were closed against him and the face of God was turned away from him; but through it all he was faithful to the God whom he maligned. "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him," was his cry; and he believed that God would indeed slay

him were it desirable, and would have no pity. "I am willing to be eternally damned should my damnation redound to the glory of God," was his heartfelt confession; and he knew not as yet that such servile submission to Divine Power was an injustice toward Divine Love.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Webb: I have brought you some flowers," said Faith, as Rufus opened the door to her and showed her into his bare little sitting-room. "I know you are fond of them."

"Thank you, Miss Fairfax, I am," replied he, taking from her the bouquet which she had prepared for him, and sniffing its scent with the epicurean delight of the born flower-lover. For a moment his stern face softened as he gazed into the hearts of the roses; then suddenly it hardened again, as he threw the posy upon the floor and trampled its soft petals beneath his feet. "And because I am fond of them I destroy them," he cried, his voice metallic with suppressed suffering. "Is this a time to be gathering flowers, and going down into the garden of spices to see whether the pomegranates have budded? Nay, it is rather a time to be girding oneself with sackcloth and covering one's head with ashes: for the day of the Lord is at hand; and who shall abide the day of His coming?"

Faith looked pitifully at the bruised roses, and at the man who was yet more cruelly bruised. "And even if His day is at hand, is that any reason why we should despise His gifts?" she asked gently.

"He brings no wreath of flowers, but rather a crown of thorns; and in His hands is a sword which shall pierce us to the quick. Child, be not deceived: it is only by self-repression and self-renunciation that men can attain unto salvation, and not all of them even then."

"Yes, Mr. Webb; self-repression and self-renunciation for another's sake, by all means; but not merely for the pain's sake. I can see that God would be pleased with you, who loved flowers so much, if you gave them up to some one whom you thought needed them more; but I cannot see that you will please Him by trampling them under your feet, and so spoiling them for yourself and everybody else."

"Child, blind not yourself by vain words: the God whom you serve is a jealous God, and He will brook no rival in the hearts of sinful men. Remember that those who love houses or lands, gardens or flowers, more than Him, are not worthy of Him; and from such He shall hide His face in anger."

Faith looked up with sweet severity: "No one would be so foolish as to love the gift more than the Giver; but it is for the sake of the Giver that one loves the gift—and the more so the more one loves Him."

"Do not tempt me," Rufus cried, walking up and down the small room, as was his custom when at all moved; "for His sake I have put away from me all pleasant things and have abjured the world with its

many delights; in the hope that when He sees my anguish and humiliation He may turn again to me and forgive me my sin."

"You do Him an injustice, believe me. He did not make the world so beautiful only in order to torture us with unsatisfied longings: He gives us every good gift in order that we, in our gratitude, may love Him all the more. And it is because we love Him that we find His gifts so fair. I do not think that we ever properly enjoy a fair landscape or a beautiful sunset until we realise that He is in it all, and through it all, and beyond it all: just as we never enjoy any other books or pictures as much as we enjoy those that are written and painted by the hands we love."

Rufus was silent, so Faith—being a wise woman—changed the subject.

"I wish you would let me lend you some books, Mr. Webb. They would divert your mind and rest you altogether."

"I read no books but my Bible; that is enough for me, and it ought to be enough for all."

"We ought not to read other books instead of our Bibles," persisted Faith with sweet placidity; "but I don't see why we shouldn't read them as well."

"What sort of books would you wish me to read?" asked Rufus, and his voice was very stern.

But it took more than sternness to frighten Faith. "I would advise you to read novels," she calmly replied. "I think there are few things which rest

one's mind and divert one's thoughts as much as reading good novels; and I am sure that just now you are sorely in need of such rest and diversion."

Again Rufus began to stride up and down the small room, like some caged wild animal. "Read novels, do you say? Why, I would rather pluck out my right eye than that it should offend by reading such trash as novels."

"But I would advise you to read such novels as are not trash," persisted Faith.

"All novels are trash—and, what is worse, they are vanity and lies. Child, do you not know that whosoever loveth and maketh a lie shall have part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone? Those who write novels make and love a lie; and those who read what they have written are like unto them."

"Then would you call all forms of art vanity and lies too—pictures and statues and poems, for instance?"

"I would; and if I had my way I would burn them all, so that they should not lure the souls of men to destruction."

"Burn books and pictures?" gasped Faith.

"Yea, every one of them on which I could lay my hand: for they are indeed the false gods and graven images which we are forbidden to worship. And is it not better that they should be destroyed by earthly fire than that men's souls should be destroyed by the fire which is never quenched?"

"But art would never destroy men's souls: it is a revelation, or rather, an interpretation, of truth; and so is meant to bring men nearer to God instead of driving them away from Him."

"Child, child, do not prophesy vain things. All false gods shall be destroyed, and likewise those who have set them up and worshipped them," persisted Rufus, growing more and more excited. "Look at that fine house yonder," he continued, pointing to the top of the hill where Baxendale Hall gleamed red among the trees; "is it not written that it shall once more be made fuel of fire? And blessed shall be the day that sees it reduced to ashes, and blessed shall be the hand that sets it alight! Rase it, rase it, rase it even to the ground, until not one stone shall be left upon another!"

"Mr. Webb, you don't mean what you say. Think of the trouble it would be to Mr. Baxendale if the home of his fathers, which is so dear to him, were to be burned to the ground; and surely he has had trouble and disappointment enough in his life already without your wishing this final blow to fall on him."

"I do wish it. My soul yearns over the soul of Laurence Baxendale, and I pray that whatever comes between his soul and God may perish forever! Have you forgotten that other young man who went away sorrowful because he had great possessions? And shall I sit still and see this young man also condemn himself to the outer darkness, because he loves

houses and lands better than the God who made him? No; Baxendale has once more to be made fuel of fire by something which is greater and stronger and higher than King or State, and that I hold to be the fear of God."

"I think there is no need for Baxendale Hall to be burned in order to teach Laurence to fear God and to keep His commandments; he has learned that lesson already from God himself and his dead father."

"Maybe; but science, falsely so called, and pleasant pictures, and the sorcerer's spells which men call novels, are fast blinding his eyes to the hidden things of God's law, and are making him of the earth earthy; nevertheless, the Lord shall destroy them in His displeasure, and the fire shall consume them."

"You have no right to say such things of Mr. Baxendale," replied Faith, for the first time showing signs of a weak spot in her almost perfect temper; "he is the best and noblest and most unselfish man I ever met."

"The young man in the Gospels had kept every commandment from his youth up, yet his great possessions were the undoing of him. Child, listen to me: I love Laurence Baxendale, though I had sworn never to love mortal man or woman again. To my everlasting shame, I love him—I, who had abjured human love as a snare of the Evil One; and I pray that his house and his books and his pictures may be destroyed by fire before he has offended past forgive-

ness that God who hath said, 'Ye shall have none other gods but Me!"

"There is no possibility of offending that God past forgiveness," said Faith softly.

"So I thought when I was your age," groaned the fanatic, sinking exhausted into a chair and burying his face in his hands; "but I fell away from my high calling—I loved the creature rather than the Creator—and now outer darkness is reserved for me forever. And because I love Laurence Baxendale—love him against my will and against my vows and against my conscience—I would destroy my soul again, were it possible, to save him from the pit wherein I have fallen myself."

"You are unjust to Laurence, but you are still more unjust to God."

"Child, you know not what you say; did you ever hear my story?" asked Rufus, looking up; and Faith's anger against him died down before the abject misery of his face.

"No; please tell it to me," she said gently, seeing that silence and loneliness had well-nigh thrown Webb's brain off the balance, and believing that confession—even to her—would be good for his soul.

"I was the child of stern and godly parents, and was brought up by them in the fear of God, and in the knowledge that His all-seeing eye was ever upon me to mark iniquity should I do amiss. With all my heart I strove to obey His word and to fulfil His pre-

cepts and to keep His laws. Like the infant Samuel, I had been dedicated to His service from my birth; and when I was old enough I took holy orders, and offered myself as a missionary, so that I might go forth and make known His word among the heathen and among the kingdoms that had not called upon His name."

"Yes; I understand," said Faith; and, encouraged by her evident sympathy, Rufus proceeded:

"But a few months before I started for China—the spot to which the Church had seen fit to appoint me—I met a woman—a young and beautiful woman; and I—the man set apart by God to bear upon the mountains His tidings of peace—turned away from my high calling, and loved this one woman with all my heart and with all my strength and with all my soul and with all my mind: loved her as I ought to have loved my God."

"And as you would have loved Him if men had not lied to you about Him," added Faith softly—so softly that Rufus did not hear her, but went on:

"So I married her, and took her out with me to China. And I loved her—my God! how I loved her, my little Lettice; I, who had given up all human love for the sake of the Cross, having put my hand to the plough, turned back because of the beauty of a woman. Yes, I loved the curls at the back of her neck, and the dimple on one side of her mouth, and the way her eyelashes turned backward, making stars of her pretty eyes. And, to my shame, I remember all

these things, and love them still; for the which God will bring me to judgment."

"Again I say you are doing God an injustice. Your love for her ought to have taught you something of His love for you, instead of which you turn His good gift into one of the nails whereby you have crucified Him afresh—for surely Annas and Caiaphas did not misjudge Him more terribly than you have done."

"But He punished me," Rufus went on, heedless of the interruption; "our God is indeed a jealous God; the idols which we worship instead of Him shall be cut down and cast into the fire, and wherewithal a man sinneth, by the same also shall he be punished. I let her deck herself with fine garments, though I ought to have known that a meek and quiet spirit is the only adornment which becomes a woman; I let her read novels, though I ought to have known that she who loveth a lie is no whit better than he who maketh a lie; and I let her laugh and sing all over my house, though I ought to have said of laughter: 'It is mad:' and of mirth, 'What doeth it?' And for this also will God bring me to judgment."

"Then what became of this beautiful woman whom you loved and married?"

"Listen, and I will tell you; and then you will see what a terrible thing it is to fight against the living God."

"But you are fighting against Him still," argued Faith; "every good gift and every perfect gift comes

from Him—be it the beauty of art, the glory of nature, or the joy of human love—and we are fighting against Him when we refuse to accept humbly His gifts, and to let them draw us nearer to Him."

Rufus did not seem to hear what Faith was saying. The memory of the past was so strong upon him that for the time being it effaced the present.

"I took Lettice out with me to China, and for a year we were ideally happy together—so happy that God was wroth with us for letting mere human bliss fill the place in our hearts which ought to have been filled by Him. Then there was a rising out there against the missionaries, and the mission house was besieged. I and my brethren held out for as long as we could; but our adversaries were too many and too strong for us, and at last we were overpowered and taken prisoners."

"And your wife? What became of her? Was she taken prisoner too?"

"Do you think I was going to let her fall into the hands of those yellow devils? Not I. When I heard the walls crash in, and knew that our enemies were upon us, I shot her dead with my own hand; shot the tender heart which had lain upon my own, and dabbled the pretty hair in blood. For love of her, and to save her from a fate which I could not bear to contemplate, I broke God's commandment which saith, 'Thou shalt not kill;' and so lost my own soul in order to save her body from torture. And for love of her I would do the same again—yea,

even were my punishment ten times greater than it is."

Faith was almost breathless with interest: "And you did not try to kill yourself as well?"

"No; I should have held it a cowardly act to save myself from the consequences of my disobedience to God's word. The Chinese made me and my comrades prisoners, intending to torture us to death; and I welcomed their tortures as some meet punishment for the sin I had committed. But God, in His justice, saw fit to make my punishment even greater than a lingering death at the hands of the Chinese: when two of us were dead and two dying—we were four in all—relief came, and we two survivors were rescued. And since then my soul has suffered agonies compared with which my bodily sufferings in that Chinese prison were as nothing."

Faith's grey eyes were full of tears. "Poor Mr. Webb, I am so sorry for you. I don't wonder, after all you have suffered, that you have formed false ideas of God; and I am sure that He doesn't wonder either."

But Rufus did not hear her; his eyes had grown dreamy and his thoughts were far away. "She had such pretty eyes," he murmured, half to himself; "and when she smiled she nearly shut them, which gave her a dreamy look, as if she were smiling at something which other people could not see. And she never could keep her hair neat, though she used to laugh and say that a clergyman's wife ought at

any rate to be tidy; but how could I blame her when it went into such dear little curls at the back of her neck, as soft as silk and as yellow as gold? And as for the dimple in her cheek——"

But Faith did not stay to hear more; she felt that she was treading on holy ground, not intended for any feet save those of the woman who was dead. So she slipped out of the room and out of the house; and Rufus Webb never heard her go, being lost for the time in the memory of a dimple which had been dust for twenty years.

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN TEMPTS.

You took my life and filled it all;
Then turned its sweetness into gall,
  And doomed me to despair, dear.
The life you spoiled is nearly done;
And if there be another one
In some strange land beyond the sun,
  I hope you won't be there, dear.

That summer was a wonderful time for Laurence and Nancy—so wonderful that it would always stand out in their mind's eyes as long as they both should live, in a sort of bas-relief against the ordinary winters and summers and seed-times and harvests of everyday existence.

For awhile Laurence forgot his anxieties and poverty and the many trials which beset him, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of those repeated coincidences which so often brought himself and Nancy together: he deliberately shut his eyes, for the time being, to the lions in his way—of which there were, in truth, a veritable menagerie—and made the most of the beauty of Nancy's eyes and the music of her laughter. And it is but fair to Nancy to add that she in no way stinted his opportunities of enjoy-

ing these simple pleasures, but promoted the frequent recurrence of them by every means in her power.

As for her, she was radiantly happy; happier than she had ever been in her life before; and happier than she would ever be again, in the same irresponsible, light-hearted way. Locked up in a remote cupboard at the very back of her mind was the certainty that Laurence loved her, although he had not told her so; and she was never weary of weaving, for her own discomfiture, doubts of him and of his honourable intentions, which she enjoyed to the full, supported as they were by that locked-up cupboard in the background.

She and Laurence talked a great deal about their friendship, and pretended—both to each other and to themselves—that this was the correct name for the thing. But they would have been terribly disappointed in their own cases, and extremely disgusted in each other's, if the pseudonym had finally proved itself to be anything but the flimsiest *nom de plume*.

Laurence found it so easy to talk to Nancy. He had not found it easy to talk to any one since his father died; and there is a luxury in the rare unreserve of reserved natures which the habitually outspoken find it impossible to appreciate. Nancy, on the contrary, felt more shy with Laurence than she had ever felt with any one; in fact, he was the only person she had ever met who could give her an inkling of what the sensation called shyness really is:

and the naturally shy person has no idea how exquisite is a faint *soupçon* of that (to him) most uncomfortable sensation to the person who has hitherto but known it as a name.

"Isn't it funny," Nancy remarked confidentially to Laurence one day when he and she were walking in the lanes, "that it is so easy to say you are glad to see people unless you really are glad to see them; and that then it is impossible?"

"Is it?" replied Baxendale, with a smile. "Then I am to conclude that you are always glad to see me save when you happen to mention the fact, and that then you are distinctly annoyed."

"I never do say I am glad to see you," said Nancy innocently; and then became rather pink when she had realised the inference which might naturally be drawn from her statement.

Laurence pretended not to notice the inference; though in going over the conversation afterward in his own mind (as he had a knack of going over all conversations wherein Nancy had taken a part) he treated that particular remark as if it had been the utterance of an inspired Sibyl. But at the time he merely said: "I thought, however, that you prided yourself on never making inane and conventional speeches, Miss Burton; although of course I am aware," he added, "that to pride oneself on not doing a thing is by no means the same as leaving it undone."

"That's true," agreed Nancy, with a laugh: "do

you know I pride myself upon being a good listener?"

"Ah!"

"And upon never saying indiscreet things?"

"So I should have supposed."

"And upon thinking too poorly of my own charms and excellencies."

"I can quite believe it."

"You are very rude, Mr. Baxendale."

"Far from it. I am merely avoiding the rudeness of contradicting a lady."

And then they both laughed, with the careless and delightful laughter of the young and foolish.

"But you are right in thinking that I can't stand the civil and obvious in the way of conversation," Nancy said: "there is a class of people who always make certain stereotyped remarks which almost drive me mad."

"As for instance?"

"Well, when you have been away from home for a week or two, they invariably call you 'a bird of passage.' It is a most horrid expression, I think; but that type of conversationalist revels in it. And then they say, 'How the days are closing in;' and 'Christmas will soon be upon us;' as if Christmas were a movable feast, and as if the days hadn't closed in and lengthened out at the same rate since the time of Adam."

"And even before then, if science is to be believed."

"Exactly. Do you know it is such a comfort to

talk to you, Mr. Baxendale, because you have what the Psalmist calls an understanding heart."

"You mean that I understand you pretty well? Perhaps I do. But I don't know that that presupposes any unusual perspicuity on my part."

"Because I am so prone to say what I think," suggested Nancy.

"Not altogether. As a matter of fact, it is when you don't say what you think—when you go out of your way to say the exact opposite—that you are most enlightening and instructive."

"Then why doesn't the understanding of me prove your abnormal cleverness," Nancy persisted.

"Because even a fool can generally master one subject, when that subject occupies the whole of his thoughts and attention to the exclusion of everything else," was Laurence's reply.

Whereupon Nancy was seized with one of her delightful and inexplicable attacks of shyness; and consequently confined the conversation to most uneventful and ordinary grooves until she and Mr. Baxendale had parted at the iron gate which guarded the back entrance to Wayside.

When Laurence reached home that afternoon he found his mother as usual in a chatty mood. She was sitting in the little drawing-room, watching the haymakers at work in the meadow below the garden; and as the sweet scents and the sweeter sounds of summer filled the air, which was as yet vibrating with Nancy's laughter, Laurence felt that the world was

indeed very good, and that life was abundantly worth the trouble of living. But Lady Alicia soon dispelled the golden glamour: she had a knack of spoiling the sweetest illusions and the most exalted moments with a rapidity and completeness which fell little short of genius.

"Isn't it a lovely afternoon, dear Laurence?" she began, as her son sat down on a chair beside her. "I think there is nothing that gives one such beautiful thoughts as the smell of new-mown hay—except perhaps the sound of a band in the distance. A few days ago there was a Flower Show at Tetleigh Wood, and as the wind was in that direction I could hear the band as I sat in the garden."

"I shouldn't have imagined that the band at a Flower Show was in itself a liberal education," said Laurence, in a voice out of which all the boyish ring had been suddenly eliminated.

"Ah! that is because you're so prosaic and commonplace that you never hear or see all the sweet and romantic things round you; but I cannot blame you for this, as you inherit it from your poor dear father —the most unpoetical and unromantic creature that ever lived."

"What sort of beautiful visions did this particular band call up before your mind's eye, my dear mother?" asked Laurence, wincing—as he always did—at his mother's way of speaking of the father whom he had adored.

"Oh! it made me feel so tender and softened and

chastened (it was playing *Two Lovely Black Eyes,* if I remember rightly; or else *The Girl I Left Behind Me;* I'm not sure now which) that I felt I quite forgave your poor dear father for all the trouble and poverty and economy that he had entailed on me by his most unjustifiable marriage with a young girl brought up in luxury as I had been—too young, alas! to know her own mind."

Laurence did not speak. However trying Lady Alicia might be, he never forgot that she was his mother; and this remembrance often obliged him to take refuge in silence, so that he might not offend with his tongue against that commandment which makes no exceptions in favour of those who have no sympathy with the idiosyncrasies of the father and mother whom they are bidden to honour.

Lady Alicia placidly continued: "The power of association is very strong in poetical natures such as mine, and that is why sounds and scents affect me so much. I remember dear Wordsworth said something very sweet about something—I forget what it was, but I fancy it was a pet lamb or a daisy—which made you think of things 'too deep for tears.' I so often feel like that."

"Indeed?" Laurence knew he was ungracious, but for the life of him he could not help it when his mother talked in this way.

"For instance," she went on, "I never smell mint-sauce without thinking of the day when dear Lord Watercress proposed to me. We were at a dinner-

party at the time, and the lamb was just being handed round: and even yet, after all these years, the smell of mint-sauce always recalls poor dear Watercress—how beautifully he spoke, and how heartbroken he was when I refused him. Ah! I had such good offers when I was young; and it was the knowledge of how much better I might have done that made it so hard for me to forgive your poor father when I discovered that he was not so well off as I had been led to expect."

Then Laurence felt constrained to expostulate: "I am sure my father never deceived you as to his income. He was the most single-minded and upright and honourable man I ever came across. He was incapable of deceiving anybody—least of all the woman he loved."

"Well, he didn't exactly deceive me in so many words: and even if he had, my dear father would have ferreted out the truth about his prospects."

"Then what do you mean by saying that father was not as well off as you had been led to expect?"

"I was such an unsophisticated, romantic young creature—full of love and fire and poetry and things of that kind, don't you know?—that, when he told me he was poor, I imagined I loved him all the more for it. Even now, and although I am speaking of myself, I cannot help feeling that there was something very beautiful and touching in a young girl who had been brought up as I had been being ready to sacrifice the world for love. It is the sort of thing

that one would read about in a novel, and think so very, very sweet."

"But, like the celebrated sacrifice to Baal on Mount Carmel, the fire from heaven was apparently wanting in your case," remarked Laurence somewhat bitterly.

Bitterness, like humour, was however lost on Lady Alicia. "Yes," she went on, in her well-bred, expressionless voice, "I can see how unspoilt and unsophisticated my nature was: and such simplicity was indeed beautiful in a girl who had never done her hair herself, or put on a dress worth less than twenty guineas since she was born. I can remember now how beautifully I spoke to Alwyn about caring more for him than for wealth or rank or any of the other necessaries of life; and how the tears came into his eyes when he kissed me, and said he hoped to God that he should prove himself in some measure worthy of such love. Oh! it was all so very, very touching and pathetic."

"But if you said all that to him, how can you blame him for believing you?"

Lady Alicia sighed plaintively: "Ah! he was older than I was, and knew more of the world and of how very unpleasant it is to be poor; and he ought not to have taken advantage of my nobility and generosity. I blame him for taking me at my word; and I shall always consider it showed a sad selfishness on his part."

"Did you ever tell him that you blamed him?" asked Laurence quietly.

"Of course I did—over and over again. I think it is such false kindness to keep from people the consequences of their own folly and selfishness. We are put into this world to help other people; and how can we do this better than by pointing out to them their faults and their mistakes, and so helping them to correct them?"

"Ah!" murmured Laurence. His mother's garrulousness threw most instructive lights upon his father's character.

"But I grieve to say that your poor father never took his chastenings in the right spirit. When I used to tell him what a bitter disappointment my marriage had been to me, and how I regretted the too great sacrifice which he had demanded at my hands, instead of apologising, as he ought to have done for having exposed a woman of my rank to such inconvenience, he used to become quite sarcastic and say things which he apparently intended to be funny, though I never could see the point of them."

"I wonder if all women end by hating their husbands, unless those husbands happen to be rich," said Laurence, meditating as to whether—should he succeed in attaining his heart's desire and winning Nancy's love—she would finally break that heart as his mother had broken his father's.

"Of course they do—all nice-minded women, that is to say, who are too delicate and sensitive to put up with a hugger-mugger home and to do without the

refinements of life. It is very beautiful to believe that love is everything when one is quite young—very, very beautiful—and it would pain me inexpressively to think that I had not believed it in my innocent girlish days: but as one grows older—and one does not mind growing older when one thinks of how beautiful the autumn tints and flowers are, and how attractive it is to grow old gracefully—one cannot but realise that a thoroughly capable butler makes a house more comfortable than the most devoted of husbands; and that one cannot really get enough to eat unless one has a cook who can make good *entrées* and savouries: the young may digest plain joints, but not the middle-aged."

A flood of pity for his poor silly mother rushed into Laurence's heart. He had not understood before how much she minded being poor. Like his father, Laurence would have believed that a man could make a woman happy quite apart from the question of money, if they only loved each other enough. And so he could, were the said woman's heart of the best quality. But many women have hearts not of the best quality; and these also have to be reckoned with. If a man build his house upon the sand, the plea that he mistook that sand for rock will in nowise avail him when the rains descend, and the floods come, and the wind blows, and the house falls; and great is the fall of it.

"I'm afraid our present circumstances are a bit

rough on you, mother," Laurence said very gently; "I wonder if there is anything that I could do which would make things easier for you."

"Dear Laurence, what a dutiful son you are! You are more unselfish than your poor father, after all. I suppose it is the Portcullis strain in your blood which makes you superior to him and more like me and my people. The Moates are all peculiarly sensitive; and this poor Alwyn never could understand."

"Still, my father's family is a considerably older one than yours, if you come to that." Laurence had made up his mind to keep his temper, whatever his mother might say; but it was no easy matter.

"Yes; there is no doubt of that. Your ancestors were owners of Baxendale while mine, poor dears! were selling wool or leather or something equally unpleasant. Nevertheless, there is a refinement and delicacy of perception among the Moates which is sadly lacking in the Baxendales."

"Then, my dear mother, considering that—according to your own showing—my density is rather my misfortune than my fault. Won't you take the trouble to point out to me, more clearly than would be necessary were I a Moate, how I can make life easier for you?"

"Ah! now you are reasonable, and remind me of my dear father, who was ever the most sensible and trustworthy of men. Well, you see—poor as we are, to begin with—this horrid fire insurance makes

us still poorer. A hundred and fifty pounds a year is a large sum to pay out of an income of barely five hundred."

"It is, mother; confoundedly large! No one knows that better than I do."

"Then, dear Laurence, couldn't you leave off paying it? We should be so much better off if you did."

"I know we should; and to tell you the truth—were I free to follow my own judgment—I should leave off paying it, and should take the risk of Baxendale being burned down for the third time. More than a quarter of one's entire income is a good deal to pay to insure oneself against an off-chance; for it is only an off-chance that the Hall should be burned down again, at any rate, in our time."

"Dear Laurence, you are a Moate at heart, though outwardly you resemble poor dear Alwyn. Then why not leave off paying that tiresome insurance money?"

"Because, unfortunately, I can't. It was stated in my grandfather's will that my father and his son only inherited the property on condition that we insured the house and the books and the pictures for a hundred thousand pounds. And if I fail to fulfil this condition I forfeit my claim on the estate, which then goes to the Hampshire Baxendales."

"You are sure of this, dear Laurence?"

"Perfectly sure. You don't suppose I should pay all that money without assuring myself that I was

bound to pay it, do you? But I grant you it is a confounded nuisance."

"Then why not sell some of the books. There are lots of clever, interesting people who would only be too glad to buy some of the dear, dirty, old things."

"Because that tiresome old grandfather of mine only left his library to my father and his heirs in trust: we have no right to part with a single volume."

Lady Alicia was silent for a moment. So was Laurence, while his thoughts ran riot on what he would say to Nancy if only he were not so horribly poor. He did not believe that his mother was right, and that Nancy's love would be measured according to his riches; nevertheless, Lady Alicia's remark had conjured up an uncomfortable doubt in his mind as to how far Nancy was actually superior to the ordinary run of girls; and he ground his teeth as he realised that his poverty made it impossible for him to set this detestable doubt at rest, once and forever, by putting a single question to her and reading the answer in her pretty blue eyes.

Then Lady Alicia began to speak again, in her sweetest and most ingratiating manner—that manner in which she used to clothe herself for the opening of bazaars and the giving away of prizes and such-like functions in the days of her prosperity, and which invariably elicited a very ecstasy of appreciation from the local newspapers, whose pleasing duty it was to send forth a report of her ladyship's gra-

ciousness to all such dwellers in outer darkness as had not enjoyed the privilege of beholding it for themselves with the eye of flesh.

"Does it never strike you, dear Laurence, what a good thing it would be if the Hall were burned down and we had that hundred thousand pounds to live upon?"

"But we couldn't use it for anything save rebuilding the house, mother; my grandfather's will sees to that."

"I know we couldn't touch the capital, my love; but we might live on the income. Or else we might spend half the capital on rebuilding and live on the interest of the rest. We could build a sweet house for fifty thousand pounds, or even less; a dear, lovely home, with all the refinements of life, and a green drawing-room carpet. I cannot tell you how I long for a green drawing-room carpet, Laurence; it has such a softening influence on the character, I think, and makes one feel as if one were living in the primeval forest, or the garden of Eden, or some other sweet spot near the heart of Nature, just as the sky-blue wall-paper seems to bring one nearer to heaven, don't you know?" For all her sentimentalism, the spirit of her commercial ancestors still lived and moved in Lady Alicia Baxendale; and she knew to a penny how that hundred thousand pounds should be invested, if only she could lay hands on it.

"I wish I could afford to buy you a green drawing-room carpet, mother." And Laurence sighed.

"Well, so you could, if you were not absurdly careful—old-maidish, I should almost call it—in seeing after dear old Mrs. Candy. I have often heard you caution the good soul against carrying a lighted candle into the library. Now, why shouldn't she, if she wants to?—and if a spark did fall among the old books and manuscripts, all the better for us!"

"Oh! mother, you are not thinking what you are saying."

"Yes, love, I am, and I have often thought it. Sometimes, when I recall the old legend, it seems to me that it would be a positive duty, instead of a sin, to burn the Hall down for the third time and so fulfil the prophecy. It is really a duty to fulfil prophecy if one can: see how anxious Daniel and Isaiah and people of that kind were to do so; and they were remarkably good men, and have always been considered so."

"Nevertheless, those who do evil that good may come are not considered remarkably good men—or, at any rate, were not by St. Paul," replied Laurence, his lips tightening into a grim smile.

"Ah! dear child, it does not do to dwell too much upon St. Paul's sayings: I often think that he was a little hard and narrow, especially where women were concerned."

Laurence thought that the Apostle to the Gentiles had some excuse for his opinions, even if Lady Alicia's strictures upon him were correct; but he did not say so, and his mother went on:

"For my part, I think you would be quite justified in lighting your pipe in the library at Baxendale or in insisting upon Mrs. Candy keeping up the fires, or in putting up hayricks close to the house."

"Oh! mother, don't; I can't bear it," cried Laurence, an almost physical spasm of pain clutching his heart. He had always wondered why his father had been so glad to die—so glad to say good-bye to the red earth and the green woods and the sunset glories of the western hills. Now he knew.

"You see, dear Laurence, the Hall has got to be burned down once again: we all know that; and it would be so much nicer if it happened in our time, while we were still able to enjoy the benefit of it. It isn't as if the Hall needn't be burned again: if that were so, I should say it was very, very wrong to do anything that could occasion the slightest danger, and you know I am the last person to countenance what I consider really wrong. But the Hall is obliged to be burned once again by something which is stronger than King or State. I so often wonder what that can mean."

"Avarice, according to you, mother," was Laurence's bitter rejoinder.

"Oh, no, dear child—something much more poetical and beautiful than that: perhaps the love of a son for a mother, or a mother for a son, or some other of those delightful and touching emotions which are so refining to the character. In fact, it seems to me that it would not only be wrong—it

would be actually right—to help to fulfil that strange old prophecy, and show one's faith in the supernatural; for there is nothing that elevates one's own mind and has such a good influence on the servants as belief in the supernatural. It keeps one from growing sordid or mean or commonplace."

Laurence fairly groaned. Never had the gulf which separated his mother from himself yawned so wide as it did now. And he knew it would be useless—worse than useless—to argue with her; he and she spoke different languages and moved on different planes.

"And then," she went on cheerfully, "think how nice it would be for you, dear Laurence, to have an income of two or three thousand a year. You might marry some nice girl, who would cure you of the somewhat morose and unsocial habits which are fast growing upon you. There is nothing like a charming wife for making a man sociable and unselfish; though, alas!" with a sigh, "his marriage never had that effect upon your poor father. I'm sure it wasn't my fault: I was always as agreeable and well-dressed as it was possible to be on our limited income; but he never seemed to appreciate my efforts to make his home attractive to other people—which I hold to be one of the chief duties of a wife."

Still Laurence was silent. A darkness which might be felt was enveloping his soul; it was all so hopeless.

His mother went on: "I sometimes think that

AND HE KNEW IT WOULD BE USELESS—WORSE THAN USELESS—TO ARGUE WITH HER.

Nancy Burton is attracted by you; and I don't know that she would be a bad wife for you, though you ought to do better. She is always well-dressed, and has quite nice manners for a person of that class. I feel sure she would jump at you, as people like that are always so glad to ally themselves with us; and no doubt Mr. Burton—dear, sensible creature that he is!—would allow his daughter a handsome sum in consideration of her making such a brilliant match. But I don't think his allowance would be sufficient to marry on, as of course you would have to keep up a separate home for me: you will understand that I—with my sensitive perceptions—could not possibly live in the same house with a girl whom——"

But this was too much for Laurence. "Excuse me, mother, but I would rather not discuss Miss Burton, even with you," he said, as he bounced out of the room and banged the door behind him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE.

The course of true love never ran
Quite easily since time began:
So said our wisest Englishman.

Michael Arbuthnot, the vicar of Tetleigh, was a man of about five-and-forty, endowed with exceptional gifts. In the first place, he was extremely good-looking, having brown hair and eyes, excellent features and a pale complexion; in the second place, he was undeniably clever, owning an admirable knack in the compiling of sermons; and in the third and most important place, he was a very good man, being distinguished by unusual keenness of spiritual insight. He also possessed in full measure that uncommon sense known as common sense: but in one of the most important decisions of his life this sense had signally failed him. Fate and circumstance and the general fitness of things—and all such powers as go to the shaping of the ends of men—deemed that Faith Fairfax was the proper wife for Michael Arbuthnot. She was made and fashioned specially to fill the rôle of a clergyman's wife; she had sufficient intellect to appreciate his powers and attainments, and sufficient grace to help, instead of hindering, him

in his duties as a parish priest. True, she was in love with Laurence Baxendale; but her affection was a very early growth and was not returned; and love —whatever poets may say to the contrary—is not a flower which flourishes in arctic regions.

Although the course of the truest love may be a stony channel with countless rocks ahead, the stream of inferior quality, which runs smoothly along neat and artificial canals, is not without its compensations. Real romance has its moments compared with which commonplace attachments become flat, stale and unprofitable: it opens the gate into a fairyland which must forever put into the shade all the ordinary comforts of the dusty highway. Who that has once danced in a fairy-ring wants to jingle up and down the road in a tram-car?—and who that has once been dazzled by "the light that never was on sea or land," can go into ecstasies over incandescent gas? Nevertheless, tram-cars and incandescent gas have their uses; and for those people who have never caught glimpses of some better thing they are very excellent inventions indeed. It is not to be denied that when the world has been well lost for love, they who have thus lost it gain their own souls in exchange, and enter into life's Holy of Holies; but when love has been well lost for the world, there are compensations likewise; the Parisian style of the trousseau and the solid nature of the wedding presents are capable of affording a joy which the more romantic lovers could in no way enter into or appreciate. So that the wise

and the foolish are both happy after their kind: and which of them is wise and which each foolish man must decide for himself, and each woman also.

But Mr. Arbuthnot (either fortunately or unfortunately—that is a moot point) was of the romantic manner of man who is set upon the marrying of the woman of his choice, and not the woman whom his world has chosen for him; and consequently that rebellious heart of his inclined toward Nora Burton and not toward Faith Fairfax; and whither his heart inclined there Michael himself followed.

His world blamed him even more for loving Nora Burton than for not loving Faith Fairfax; as a matter of fact, it always does seem worse to do those things one ought not to have done than merely to leave undone those things one ought to have done; although the General Confession thinks differently and puts the two sins on the same level. And his world went even further; it decreed that if Mr. Arbuthnot must so far forget himself and his sacred calling as to fall in love with a Burton at all, Nancy rather than Nora was the one for him.

Nevertheless, it is possible—though it seems both ungrateful and presumptuous to suggest such a possibility when we consider how generous and unsparing our friends and neighbours always are in meting out condemnation upon our past and counsel with regard to our future actions—that Mr. Arbuthnot knew his own business best.

Now, it may be taken as an axiom that if a man is

a good son—and, still more, a good brother—that man will be a good husband; and any woman is safe in entrusting her happiness to him until death them do part, with an absolute certainty that her trust will not be betrayed. But on the other hand, strange to say, it does not follow that a good daughter and sister will necessarily make a good wife: she may or she may not. In fact, very often the rôle is reversed. The reason for this lies in the deep-rooted difference between a ruling and a subject race. If a man has learned to govern wisely and kindly the woman of his father's household, he will wisely and kindly govern the women of his own; but if a woman has submitted herself with all meekness for the first term of her natural life, she grows weary of subjection and wants to reign in her turn. Therefore, in all probability, the most dutiful daughter will make the most wilful wife; while the "revolting daughter," who has implicitly disobeyed all her father's commands, will be as tired of rebellion as her gentler sister is of subjection, and will settle down quite meekly into double harness. In the same way it is a noticeable fact that the naturally bad-tempered woman is amiable toward nobody except the man she loves; while the naturally good-tempered woman is amiable toward everybody except the man she loves; which proves that to the normal woman the world is divided into two unequal parts, to which she shows the two directly opposite sides of herself—the man she loves being the larger half, and everybody and everything else the other.

But, after marriage, the real nature of the woman reasserts itself; thenceforward the naturally good-tempered woman is good-tempered, and the naturally bad-tempered woman bad-tempered, to the end of the chapter. Wherefore it behooves the man who is wooing to walk circumspectly and with wide-open eyes.

Although Nancy was the more amiable and adaptable sister in the home life, Nora was the easier to get on with from a lover's point of view. As far as in her lay, Nora provided that the course of true love should run smooth: but Nancy amused herself by making artificial little rapids and shallows, in case nature had not supplied sufficient excitement for her in this respect. She loved to tease Laurence in and out of season, and to rouse his jealousy; she was always inventing some excuse for a quarrel and making it up again; and he never delivered himself of the simplest statement that she did not openly dispute. Nora, on the other hand, sweetly obeyed the law Mr. Arbuthnot laid down; and contented herself and him by letting him make up for her that clever mind of hers. He had not yet told her that he loved her, but she was perfectly cognisant of the fact; and, having once grasped it, would never again doubt it, as Nancy would have done fifty times a day—and would thoroughly have enjoyed the doubts, too. No; Nancy was not altogether easy sailing; but she was great fun; and there are men who enjoy amusement more than ease.

"What are you thinking about, Mr. Arbuthnot?" Nora enquired of the vicar one afternoon, as he and she were walking together from Tetleigh to Wayside.

"Well, to tell the truth, I was wondering how far short of our ideal we may fall without being in any way to blame. One cannot always be at one's best; that is impossible; but I wonder how far below one's best one's daily walk and conversation may lie."

"I understand what you mean: you are wondering how many half-holidays we may take from the ideal without playing truant."

"Exactly," argued the vicar, with a smile.

"And half-holidays are absolutely necessary, aren't they?"

"They are; but, on the other hand, the ideal ought to tinge our half-holidays; if we have once seen the heavenly vision, we must never be disobedient to it, you know."

Nora was quick to catch his idea: "You mean that though we can't always be looking at the vision, we mustn't forget that we have once seen it," she said.

"Yes; that is exactly what I do mean. And I think it is a little difficult to hit upon the happy medium between disobeying the heavenly vision on the one hand and dwelling upon it in exclusion to our daily duties on the other."

"Which of the two evils do you think the least?"

"Undoubtedly the latter. If one has ever seen the

best of anything, in love or life or art, as well as in religion (for I believe the heavenly vision comes to us in innumerable ways), it is sin for us not to obey it. We need not be always thinking about it; but we must never be disobedient to it. Therefore, it seems to me, that the few among us to whom it is granted to see the best in any walk of life have duties entailed upon us from which ordinary men and women are exempt."

"Then we have to pay even for our heavenly visions," said Nora, with a sigh.

"We have. There is an old heathen saying that the gods give nothing—they only sell; and I believe there is some truth in it. We can get nothing for nothing in this world: and I think it is a very good thing that we can't."

Thus Michael taught and Nora listened; and in the process they grew to know and love each other better every day.

It happened that while these two were holding sweet converse on the road from Tetleigh to Wayside, Laurence and Nancy were holding anything but sweet converse on their way back from Baxendale Hall; and the front of their offending was as follows: A friend of Anthony, Bertie Crawshay by name, had been spending a few days at Wayside—nominally with Anthony, but actually with Anthony's cousin. There is no use disguising the fact that Nancy had flirted outrageously with this young man, actuated thereto by two powerful reasons: *first,*

by a natural desire to make life pleasant to herself; *secondly*, by an equally natural if less laudable one to make it unpleasant to Laurence Baxendale. And in both respects she had succeeded beyond her utmost expectations: the flirtation had amused her and annoyed Laurence more than she had dared to hope, and consequently she was in high spirits.

"I haven't seen you for ages," she exclaimed, after she and Laurence had greeted each other in the Park, she with an extreme pleasantness, which was meant to be unpleasant, and he with excessive politeness which was intended to be rude; "it is at least two hundred and seventy-five years since we met."

"Is it? I hadn't noticed it, Miss Burton," replied Laurence stiffly, who knew that exactly four days, three hours and twenty-five minutes had elapsed since he last set eyes on Nancy.

"How are you?" she enquired, with engaging sweetness.

"I'm all right, thank you," was the response, with no sweetness at all.

"Are you? I'm so glad. I asked because you don't look particularly grand, you know; I'm afraid you've been doing too much this hot weather; and though it is very jolly, it takes it out of one."

"The weather seems to me perfect, and I can assure you, Miss Burton, that your anxiety as to my health is entirely misplaced—I never felt better in my life." He really was very disagreeable; but then what right had a girl to go about with an ass of a

fellow such as Crawshay for three days and behave as if she liked it? he asked himself, in excuse.

"You mean you never felt worse," Miss Nancy said to herself; but aloud she merely remarked with the utmost suavity: "It is so nice to see you again! Do you know, we haven't met for such centuries that I had forgotten the colour of your hair and the shape of your nose? I really had."

"I am flattered to find that you waste time in striving to recall my uninteresting features. But, believe me, you make a mistake; they are not worth remembering."

Nancy was delighted: Laurence was even angrier than she had expected him to be: "Oh! your nose is well worth remembering, it is such a nice shape; you don't do it justice; its loveliness increases, and it will never pass into nothingness, according to Keats. But though I did forget the shape of your nose, I didn't forget you, because I have been telling Bertie Crawshay all about you, and that has served to keep my memory green."

Laurence bowed: "Thank you; I am, however, as unworthy of Mr. Crawshay's notice as of yours. Sorry you and he could not find a more interesting subject of conversation than myself."

"Oh! but we could—heaps upon heaps, and much more interesting; but you happened to crop up now and then among the rest."

"Then I have no more to say." Laurence was very angry. He had held Nancy too sacred to be

discussed even between himself and his mother, and in return Nancy had talked him over with this young jackanapes. It really was unpardonable, and he had no intention of pardoning it. So much for the futility of masculine intentions!

"What? No more to say, when you haven't seen me for a whole week? Well, you are a most disappointing person! I expected you to have no end to tell me after this long separation."

"Yes, I am disappointing enough; but your error lay in expecting too much of me. You know, 'Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall not be disappointed;' that is my favourite Beatitude."

Nancy's blue eyes appeared to be full of sympathy and interest: "Then do you ever feel disappointed in people, too, Mr. Baxendale? Oh! I am so sorry." Yes, Laurence was right; she really was unpardonable.

"Pray, do not waste upon me sympathy which might be so much better expended," he replied with exaggerated ceremony; "you misunderstood my remark: I meant that I don't often meet with disappointment, for the simple reason that I am not such a fool as to expect much from people."

"How very interesting and clever of you! But don't you find it rather dull?"

"Not disagreeably so. I do not—like you—expect people who have not seen me for a week to be ready to greet me with an accumulation of brilliance which they have been storing up for me at compound

interest in my absence: on the contrary, I expect them to have forgotten my very existence in the society of more cheerful and congenial companions; and—unlike you—I admit I am rarely disappointed."

They walked on in silence for a minute or two, until they came to the gate which separated Baxendale Park from the lanes. Then Nancy asked in her most airy manner: "I say, shall we go home the long or the short way?"

Laurence looked at his watch without in the least seeing what time it was: "You must, of course, please yourself, Miss Burton. I must get back home as quickly as possible, as I am rather busy to-day."

Then came another silence, and Nancy, knowing to an inch how short was now the distance to the turning where the way to Poplar Farm branched off from the way to Wayside, and having an instinctive knowledge that Laurence would say good-bye at that turning and not walk home with her, began to think it was time for a change in the tactics of her warfare. "You seem rather cross to-day," she said quite meekly, looking up at Laurence with a face out of which the mischief had died.

Laurence raised his eyebrows in apparent surprise: "I, cross?—what do you mean, Miss Burton? I am afraid I must be very bad mannered to give you such an idea: for which bad manners please accept my humble apologies."

"Then aren't you cross?" Nancy's voice was meeker than ever.

"Not in the least. What ever put such an idea into your head?"

Nancy began to get rather frightened. It is one thing to play with fire and quite another (and a much less agreeable one!) to burn one's own fingers. "I thought perhaps you were vexed with me about something."

"I?—vexed with you? Impossible. I am afraid that too brilliant imagination of yours is leading you astray. You are inventing offences on my part for the express purpose of showing resentment on your own. I fancy you will find that both offence and resentment are mythical."

Nancy felt it was time to play trumps if she did not wish to lose the game altogether: "I thought you were vexed with me about Bertie Crawshay," she blurted out. It was a most feminine card.

But Laurence held trumps in his hand, too, and took her queen with his king: "My dear Miss Burton, what earthly right have I to dictate to you who shall be and who shall not be your friends? It would be gross impertinence on my part to express annoyance at anything which you might think fit to do: an impertinence of which I hope I am incapable."

Nancy looked at him sideways, with an expression in which fear and shame and curiosity were equally blended. Laurence happened to turn round at that moment and caught the look: he wished he had not seen it, as it somewhat weakened his praiseworthy intention to uphold his own dignity in the sight of this

most insolent and unfeeling young woman. Nevertheless, he continued: "As I said before, I extremely regret that anything in my unfortunate manner should have led you to believe me guilty of the unpardonable liberty of criticising or even discussing your conduct; but if you will overlook it this time, I can promise you that for the future I will take care to avoid even the appearance of such an evil."

Nancy had nearly lost the game, and she knew it; but still she held the ace. The question was, should she play it, or should she uphold her dignity as high as Laurence was now upholding his, and throw down the cards, refusing to play any longer against so determined an adversary? She hesitated a minute, and looked round: they were in the most secluded of the lanes, and nobody—not even a scarecrow—was in sight. Yes, the ace would have to go; there was no doubt of that. As far as it was in Nancy to be shy of anything, she was shy of the strength of her own feelings; she generally kept them resolutely out of sight, and

> made a curtain
> Out of her laughter to hide her love.

But now she laid an entreating little hand on her companion's arm, and—for the first time in her twenty-two years—she allowed her whole heart to well up into her eyes as she raised them to his and whispered:

"Laurence, I know I've been a brute; won't you forgive me?"

And then and there, in spite of his praiseworthy desire to uphold his own dignity—in spite of his justifiable intention to properly punish her unbecoming behaviour—in spite of his laudable decision to tell no woman of his love until he was in a position to marry her—Laurence Baxendale suddenly took Nancy in his arms and covered her face with kisses.

"My darling," he murmured, "I love you, I love you! It was I who was the brute; but I shouldn't have been if I had not cared for you so much and been so confoundedly jealous."

Nancy laughed as well as she could in the circumstances. "You silly boy, were you very jealous?"

"Rather! Couldn't you see it?"

"Distinctly; a blind bat could have seen it with his eyes shut. And, do you know, I think jealousy is my favourite virtue in a man?—when it's about me, of course, I mean."

"And I'm a brute to make love to you now, considering that I'm such a poor beggar I shan't be able to ask you to marry me for years and years probably; but I simply couldn't help it when you looked at me like that."

"Then do you love me very much?"

"My darling, I adore you."

After another hiatus in the conversation, Laurence said: "You haven't told me yet that you love me, sweetheart. Nancy, do you love me?"

Then Nancy put her two hands on his shoulders and pushed him away from her, looking him full in

the face with her heart still in her eyes: "I love you with all my heart and soul and strength, and I always shall love you: and there never has been and never will be any man in the world for me except you: and now let us be funny again, and forget that we're so badly in love."

So the ace won the trick after all.

CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER WOMAN TEMPTS.

"The woman tempted me and I did eat:"
Such the apology once made by Adam,
Who paved a way more trodden by men's feet
Than any fashioned by the great Macadam.

THE following afternoon Nancy was silent with the silence which accompanies excessive happiness, even in the most loquacious people. When one has just been treading the highways to Zion and beholding visions of angels, it is difficult to bring oneself down to the level of ordinary conversation with one's fellow creatures—particularly when those fellow creatures happen to be relations. And so Nancy found it.

Anthony, in fraternal fashion, was not slow to observe this unusual reticence on the part of his generally loquacious kinswoman.

"What is the matter with our beloved Nancy?" he asked of Nora, in a stage whisper loud enough to have pierced ears much more remote than Nancy's: "is it her liver or her lover that is out of order, and so produces this distressing and unnatural depression?"

"You must ask her," replied Nora; but Nancy did

not take any notice. She found Laurence's past remarks much more nourishing food for meditation than Anthony's present ones—a not unprecedented experience of female relations.

Tony gazed at her pensively: then murmured,

"Oh, that those lips had language! Life has passed
But slowly with me and Nora since we heard thee last."

Then the mystic roused herself sufficiently to speak: and her speech was to the point: "Don't be an ass," was all she said.

"I will try not—indeed I will; but, as I have remarked before, it runs in the Burton family, as it did in Balaam's. The only difference being that Balaam was amazed when his ass spoke; we, on the contrary, marvel when ours is silent."

Nora laughed, and Nancy tried not to do so.

"But the reason for the upset is the same in both cases," Anthony went on: "the ass saw an angel in the way."

"I'd rather hold my tongue till doomsday than talk as much nonsense as you do," said Nancy.

"Nevertheless, your daily walk and conversation give the lie to this statement," Anthony sighed. "Would that it were not so!"

"What are you going to do after tea, Tony?" asked Nora, who naturally did not take an absorbing interest in this accurate diagnosis of her sister's amatory condition.

"I shall go for a stroll in the lanes, I think, in or-

der that my always delicate digestion may recuperate itself between the efforts of tea and dinner. I always find, if I don't take exercise at this particular hour, that I am incontinently launched upon my dinner before I have duly forgotten my tea. And there is something rather indecent in that—like marrying again before one's first wife is sufficiently dead, don't you know?"

Whereupon Nancy woke up thoroughly: "You can't go for a stroll in the lanes, then—I am occupying the lanes myself this evening," she said, as if she were referring to a common bathroom which was used in turns.

Anthony fairly gloated over her discomfiture: "Ah! now we have hit the nail—that is to say, our beloved Nancy—upon the head. Then how are Nora and I to get such exercise as the state of our digestions and the size of our teas demand, I should like to know?"

"You can go for a walk along the road. The highroad is good enough for relations," replied Nancy indifferently.

Anthony clasped his hands in mock admiration: "Oh, wise young judge, how I do honour thee! Where did you learn all these truisms, my dear young friend?"

"Oh! in various places."

"I am going to write a new version of *Eyes and No Eyes,*" said Tony; "it will be about a good little girl who never made eyes, and so the highroad was

as uninteresting and uninstructive to her as the loveliest lane: and about a naughty little girl who always made eyes wherever she went, so long as there was somebody (it didn't matter who) to make eyes to: and in consequence the dullest field paths to her were full of delightful and sentimental memories; and the less frequented a road by ordinary traffic the more pleasure she got out of it."

"It will be a very nice story," applauded Nora, to whom also the lanes at the back of Wayside were not altogether untrodden ground.

Anthony sighed: "Then do you agree with Nancy in exiling yourself and me from the cool, sequestered lanes of life, and condemning our tottering footsteps to the 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer of the 'ard 'igh-road?"

Nora nodded: "Nancy and I always play fair about the lanes. We never enter them when they are being occupied by the others; and we keep the rest of the family away, too."

"How do you keep my esteemed aunt and uncle away on these interesting occasions?"

Nora smiled demurely: "We tell mother that there are tramps about, and father that it is damp under foot."

Anthony shouted with laughter: "Well, you and Nan are two for a pair, as my old nurse used to say."

"We certainly are intelligent young women," said Nora, with complacency.

Then Anthony again turned his attention to the elder sister: "If I were you I should learn a lesson from the sermons in stone—those stones which are laid down for the prevention of traffic by the County Council: and I should station at the entrance to your particular lane a youth with a red banner bearing the strange device, 'This road is closed for repairs without the re.' Now I call that a distinctly neat idea."

Nancy could not help laughing, although she was in love. "Really, Tony, you are killing! Your bitterest enemy couldn't deny that you are convulsing at times."

"With which compliment let us withdraw, lest you should think better of it and add a codicil or a postscript which might give me pain, and undermine that absolute self-appreciation which is the keystone to my interesting and complex character," said Anthony, getting up from the easy-chair where he had been lounging and going out of the room. "Come along, Nora, and we'll get the dogs, and leave our dear Nan to derive what intellectual pleasure she can from the society of one who is a man but not a brother."

"All right." And Nora obediently followed him.

When the others had started for their walk, Nancy put on her hat and wandered through the orchard and across the field to the iron gate which led straight into fairyland; and as she strolled along the grassy road, with its high green hedges on either side shutting off the common workaday world, she wondered

how anybody could ever feel unhappy on such a beautiful earth as this. She had always been susceptible to the beauties of nature, though hitherto they had awakened in her a sort of indefinable craving—what for she did not know—a sort of unconscious questioning, to which apparently there was no answer. Sometimes there had seemed to her to be a useless prodigality of beauty, as if the foolish old earth had put on her glorious apparel and decked herself with her jewels for a gala day which never came. Surely simpler garments would have been sufficient for the trivial rounds and the common tasks which do not furnish all we ask—even if they furnish all we ought to ask—when we are on the sunny side of thirty. But now at last Nancy understood why the earth beneath her was paved with emerald, and the heavens above her were crowned with a sapphire dome—why each wild flower was a marvel of exquisite workmanship, and each star in the firmament had its place in that majestic choir whose *Te Deum* was begun in the dawn of creation by the sons of God. It was because the "birthday of her life had come—because her love had come to her," that she found out why the earth had been made so beautiful; for Laurence's feet the emerald pavement had been laid down—over Laurence's head the canopy of sapphire had been suspended—and now, because Laurence loved her and told her so, the mountains and the hills broke forth before her into singing, and all the trees of the field clapped their hands.

Nancy's friends, with the singular blindness of those who have known us from our youth up, would have said (in fact, did say) that she was too shallow and light-hearted to fall in love in the ordinary accepted use of the term. Because she continually laughed and hardly ever cried, they decided that the deeper things of life were a closed book to her merry blue eyes: and because she chose to wear upon her sleeve such selections from her heart as she considered suitable for publication, they made up their minds that these selections constituted her whole property in that line, and that—because she talked freely about some of her feelings—such feelings as she did not talk about were non-existent.

There are no people so sorely misjudged in this world as the people who go through life as laughing philosophers; just as there is no figure in nursery lore so pathetic as that of the jolly miller who lived by the river Dee. Does any one imagine the man of malt would have troubled to have informed his world that he cared for nobody and nobody cared for him if such a statement had indeed been true? Not he! He would rather have made affecting speeches at charity organization meetings—and wept copiously at the imaginary woes portrayed in theatres—and told pathetic stories of his early love affairs—and generally conducted himself as all such elderly gentlemen conduct themselves who are actually what the (so-called) jolly miller pretended to be. It was because he cared so much that he pretended to care so

little. Nevertheless, he thereby deceived all children, both of smaller and of larger growth: which, after all, is what he desired and intended to do.

Nancy had not wandered far along the land when she saw a well-known figure in a light tweed suit coming toward her from the direction of Poplar Farm. For a second she was possessed with an insane desire to run away and hide herself where that tweed-clad figure could not find her; and yet she was fully aware that—for the rest of her days—all roads that did not lead to that figure would be unfit for traffic, as far as her feet were concerned. Such is the contrariety of the feminine mind.

There was a look in Laurence's grey eyes as he greeted her which made her want more than ever to run away from him at once, and never to run away from him at all as long as she lived—two desires which naturally were incompatible. So she gave herself—and him—the benefit of the doubt and remained.

After they had strolled together right down into the heart of fairyland, using by the way such fond talk as lovers are wont to use when no reporter happens to be present, they finally arrived at a stile set in the middle of an unfrequented field, as far from the madding crowd as it is possible to be in Mershire. And upon this stile they sat, side by side, after the approved fashion of Robert Burns and his Mary.

Why tradition has assigned a stile as the seemly

resting place for lovers is an interesting problem. Taken as a seat, *qua* seat, it is indefensible, combining, as it does, the minimum of comfort in remaining on with the maximum of danger in falling off; and even putting so commonplace a consideration as comfort out of the question, the difficulty of balancing oneself for any length of time on so limited a space must always in some degree interfere with the fluency of conversation of persons thus delicately balanced. Nevertheless, a stile has always been, and always will be, the regulation throne of King Cupid; and any attempt to substitute for it a more convenient and less uncomfortable resting place would be on a par with reorganising a monarchy or disestablishing a State church.

"Are you quite sure you love me, sweetheart?" asked Laurence, all the big heart of him shining out of his large grey eyes.

Nancy nodded: "Absolutely certain. I'd take an oath to that effect before a magistrate's clerk or a coroner's jury without running the slightest risk of seven years for perjury."

"You silly little child, what nice nonsense you talk!"

"So do you. Do you know, you really have been frightfully silly this afternoon?"

"I know that, baby. I like being silly. Anybody can be clever—in fact, I was clever myself long before I'd ever seen you. But it takes a man who is

absolutely and devotedly in love to be becomingly silly: and there are precious few of that sort in this wicked world, I can assure you, Miss Burton."

"How much do you love me?" asked Nancy.

"As much as I can; and that's a jolly lot."

"But how much can you?"

"As much as this," replied Laurence, covering her face with kisses.

"That's no answer; it's like saying 'as big as a lump of chalk.' You're as bad as me, when I once wrote to a bookseller's shop and ordered a prayer-book the same size as a birthday text-book. You can imagine how father and Tom roared at me."

"I can."

"I want you to tell me exactly how much you love me," Nancy persisted.

"A little bit more than you love me."

"Then how much do I love you?"

"Ah! that is your business. You can't expect me to give an accurate diagnosis of your symptoms, my darling, when I am so culpably ignorant of my own. Now I must confess that I should have thought a clever girl like you could have answered a simple little question like that."

"And I should have thought a clever man like you could have answered it."

"But I don't set up as being clever, and you do."

Nancy smiled: "You were considered very clever at Oxford, weren't you?"

"I was: but I'm not responsible, you know, for all

the traditions to which so antique and interesting a city give birth."

"And mathematics were your strong point, weren't they?"

"I always prided myself on being able to put two and two together."

"Well, then," and Nancy nodded her head triumphantly, "a good mathematician ought to be able to measure so simple a thing as his own love for a girl."

"Excuse me: but the very best mathematicians cannot measure infinity." And Laurence kissed her again. "But I'd spend the rest of my days in trying to show you how much I love you," he continued more seriously, "if only I wasn't so confoundedly poor."

"It is a nuisance;" and Nancy sighed, thereby cutting Laurence to the heart. It was intolerable to him to think that he—who desired nothing so much as her happiness—should be the one to bring that pathetic note into her voice and that sad look into her eyes.

"But never mind," he said, after a moment's pause, trying to take a more encouraging view of things: "the luck is sure to turn soon, and then I can speak to your father and we can be properly engaged. Probably I shall succeed in letting some of the farms that just now are empty—I might even be able to let the Hall—and then you'll soon see how much I love you, sweetheart."

"I suppose that fire insurance hampers you a good deal," remarked Nancy, thoughtfully.

"It does; confound the beastly thing!"

"And you couldn't leave off paying it?"

"Not without forfeiting the property, according to my grandfather's will."

"And you couldn't sell the old library?"

"Not without the same disastrous result."

"I think it is very unfair of people to make wills like that."

"So do I: but when they have made them there is no use in defying them."

"I wish the prophecy would come true and the Hall be burned down again," remarked Nancy, with another sigh.

"So do I, for some things: but the misfortunes that one desires are invariably the misfortunes from which one is preserved."

"I suppose if it did come true you would have plenty of money."

"Plenty, my darling: but it won't come true; so it's no use thinking about it."

After a minute's silence Nancy said: "I wish we could call down fire from heaven to consume Baxendale Hall, and be happy ever afterward."

"But you see we can't, dear love."

"Couldn't you light your pipe there—or have a bonfire on Guy Fawkes' day—or something of that kind?"

Laurence was struck—as we are all struck now

and again—by the strangeness of that unwritten law which rules that history, even in the smallest things, shall repeat itself. We hear the name of a place or a person which we have never heard before, and during the next day or two that place or person is again mentioned in our hearing: we come upon a word that is entirely new to us; and in the next book we open, that particular word hits us full in the face. We are all familiar with this phenomenon, yet it never ceases to surprise us; and therefore it came as a shock to Laurence—when in accordance with this remarkable law of chance—Nancy said the very same thing which his mother had said to him so short a time before.

"My darling, don't say such things, even in jest. It hurts me to hear you say them."

"But I can't help wishing them. Oh! Laurence, you don't know how I love you, and how horrid everything is without you." And Nancy's lip quivered.

Laurence took her in his arms and tried to comfort her. "Don't fret, sweetheart. Things will take a turn for the better soon: I know they will. And then think what lovely times we will have together!"

"But not until we are too old to enjoy them," argued Nancy disconsolately. "It won't be much fun going about together if we have to go in two Bath-chairs with a glass down."

"We shan't do that."

"Yes, we shall; and I shall look at you through

blue spectacles, and you will make love to me down an ear-trumpet, and everything will be simply detestable."

"Dear little child, don't fret," repeated Laurence.

"But I must fret—I can't help fretting—you should never have kissed me if you hadn't wanted me to fret. And we might have such fun if only you'd make a bonfire of the silly old place. I hate the sight of it!"

"Oh, Nancy!"

"Yes, I do; and it has got to be burned down a third time by something which is greater and higher than King or State, and what can that be, I should like to know, but love? I don't believe you're really in love with me at all, or else you'd be only too pleased to burn down your house in order that I might warm my hands at the blaze. In fact, that is what you would do if you were a really nice, obliging, chivalrous, Sir-Walter-Raleigh kind of a man."

"Perhaps I might, if it wasn't insured: that makes all the difference, don't you see?"

"No, I don't."

"Don't you see that it would have taken the shine out of old Raleigh's cloak-trick if he'd covered the puddle with a borrowed mantle, knowing that he should get a brand new one out of the transaction?"

"I can't think why you don't fire Mrs. Candy with a desire to read some of the old manuscripts so that she might study them by candle light and in her turn fire the Hall."

Laurence believed that Nancy was talking the broadest nonsense and did not mean a word she said; nevertheless, it hurt him that her suggestions should so exactly coincide with his mother's. "My darling," he entreated, "don't make life harder than it really is by saying things that cut me to the heart."

But Nancy only laughed: "You see, the Hall has got to be burned down a third time—everybody who knows anything at all knows that—and it would be so lovely if only it would happen in our time. Nobody will ever get as much fun out of the money as you and I should, Laurence, dear."

"Perhaps not, darling. You know I mind it all as much as you do, don't you?"

"I suppose you do," rather doubtfully: "but you remind me of the old Scotch woman who went for the first time to a ritualistic church and said, 'Na doot they love the Lord, but sakes! they've a funny way o' showing it.' You've a funny way of showing it, too."

But Laurence's face was too sad to smile: "I'm sure you don't want me to be more unhappy than I need be, Nancy?"

"I don't want you to be unhappy at all, silly: that's what I keep proving, if you'd only attend to what I say. I want us both to be happy—perfectly, gloriously, frightfully happy—until every week seems like a cricket-week and every day like a bank-holiday."

"So do I, sweetheart: and we will be some day. But in the meantime, don't break my heart."

"Certainly not. I'm not such a goose as to go about smashing my own property."

"Well, you will break it if you go about saying things which you don't mean in the very least, but which somehow lower my ideal of you."

Nancy made a face: "Now we shall hear something really improving. The preacher for this afternoon will be the Reverend Laurence Baxendale, sometimes postmaster at Merton: his subject will be the follies of young women in general, exemplified by largely exaggerated magic-lantern slides of the peculiar negligences and ignorances of Miss Nancy Burton."

But Laurence would not be put off by her jokes: "My dear, you don't really want to hurt me, do you?"

"You silly old boy, of course I don't. Do you think that my usual way of annoying a man is to tell him that I love him? Because if you do, it isn't particularly complimentary to me."

"Then promise me you will never say anything again, even in jest, about burning down the Hall."

"All right, you shall make out an *Index Expurgatorius* of the things I mustn't make jokes about. It will include everything that begins with a B.—Baxendales and Burning and Burtons and Beatitudes, and so on and so on."

"Give me a kiss to seal your promise."

And she kissed him full on the lips.

Nevertheless, it was many a long day before either

Laurence or Nancy forgot that conversation. They imagined, in the blindness of their hearts, that they had cancelled it with kisses: but no kisses, nor tears, nor even death itself can ever wipe out the effects of the spoken word whereof it is written that men and women shall give an account in the Day of Judgment.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. CANDY'S HOLIDAY.

With mine own people I awhile must dwell,
If only to find out if they are well,
And hear the things which they alone can tell.

"I'm just thinkin', sir, as I should like a holiday," Mrs. Candy said to Laurence the next time he was up at the Hall. "I was sayin' to her leddyship only t' other day that it was many a long year since I'd had a sight o' my own people; and though yewr own people may try yew sore when they're with yew, there's no doubt as yew want to see 'em now and then—just as camomile tea is as bitter as bitter when yew are drinkin' it, and yet yew can't get on without a dose of it from time to time."

"I suppose not."

"So I says to her leddyship, says I, 'I'm wantin' to go back to Norfolk for a spell,' I says: and she says to me, 'Why don't you ask Mr. Baxendale for a holiday,' says she; 'I'm sure as he'd give it yew this bewtiful summer weather.' And Candy, he says as her leddyship had right on her side, to his thinkin'; so I've made bold to ask if I may go away for a bit."

Laurence could not help wishing that his mother had not furthered the evacuation of the Hall so soon

after her unpleasant suggestion to him; but he immediately put away the thought as an insult to Lady Alicia, and said quite agreeably: "Of course I shall be glad to give you a holiday, Mrs. Candy, if you wish it. But how will Candy manage to get on without you?"

"He won't manage, sir. Bless yew, Candy couldn't get along without me to look after him, and slave for him, and wash his clothes and listen to his grumblings, no, not if it was ever so; he's a good husband, is Candy. But her leddyship says as maybe yew'd give him a holiday tew; and we thought as it would be a good time to go to Overstrand, and see as the family grave is in good order, ready for me when it's my turn to lie within it," explained Mrs. Candy cheerfully.

"A strange fashion of spending a holiday: but people must enjoy themselves in their own way, I presume."

"And there'd not only be the pleasure o' puttin' the grave in good order, sir, but my niece, Maria Jane, she's just had twins, she has, poor soul!—twins, like misfortunes, never comin' singly, as they say. And what time I had to spare from weedin' in the churchyard I could be lookin' after Maria Jane and the twins. Oh! there'd be plenty to pass the time, Mr. Baxendale; so that Candy and me need never have a dull minit."

"I see."

"And Candy 'ud take a few cuttin's o' different

sorts o' flowers to plant on the grave, so as to make it look more cheerful like when my time comes. He said if I'd no objection, he'd like try a bit o' carpet-gardenin' on it, carpet-gardenin' bein' so handy, and lookin' well nearly all the year round. 'And yew'll want it all the year round,' he says, with a laugh; 'it ain't only a summer residence,' says he, as peart as peart. Oh! he's one for his joke, is Candy."

"You already seem to have provided yourselves with a full and interesting programme," remarked Laurence.

"Well, yew see, sir, that's the bewty o' goin' among yewr own people—there's always somethin' to du and to talk about, be it christenin's or funerals. And I du say as next to a death there's nothin' like a birth for cheerin' a family up a bit."

"I suppose not."

"That's the worst o' bein' but a stranger and a sojourner, as yew may say, as I have been iver since I left Norfolk. Folks die and folks are buried all the world over; but I deny as yew iver enjoys findin' fault as to how they have left their bit o' money as much as yew du when it's yewr own flesh and blood as is to blame."

"That is true, Mrs. Candy." And Laurence laughed.

"Now, there was my uncle Willum—him as I've so often told yew about; bless yew, sir! we niver got tired o' talkin' of his bit o' money and how unfairly he'd left it—niver. If iver we'd a family party,

Uncle Willum's bit o' money 'ud come up, sure as fate; and then there'd be plenty to talk about, never fear, however late it might be afore the party broke up. Afore his death we'd talk of how he ought to leave it, no tew bein' o' one mind on the subject, which kep' the ball a-rollin' and gave the men somethin' pleasant and interestin' to argufy about: and after his death we'd all abuse him for the way he had left it, and that was more pleasant if less excitin'. Oh! I'm sure I dunno what we should have found to talk about many a time if it hadn't been for Uncle Willum and his bit o' money."

Laurence sighed. "Money—or the want of it—certainly does seem to be the root of most evils: at least, if one is to judge from history."

"Oh! don't yew worry yewrself over history, Mr. Baxendale," said Mrs. Candy, in a soothing voice; "Candy's no opinion of history, hasn't Candy; and he's no patience wi' learnin' childern about it at schule. 'What's the good o' learnin' 'em all about past and gone kings and queens?' he says; 'they're dead and buried, and let 'em lay,' says he. That's what Candy thinks about history." And Candy's better half nodded her head triumphantly at this unanswerable refutation of the testimony of all living or dead historians.

"I didn't know that Candy was such an authority on education."

Mrs. Candy fairly bridled: "He is, though—and on most things else. There ain't much in this warld

as Candy hasn't got to the bottom of—I can tell yew that, sir. And he don't hold wi' schules, Candy don't, never havin' had much schulin' hisself."

"A most natural disapprobation," murmured Laurence.

"And he don't hold wi' scholards, neither. I remember i' the late Mr. Baxendale's time Candy got a new gardener's boy which was a perfect scholard. 'How does the new boy get on, Candy?' says the late Mr. Baxendale. 'Get on, sir?' says Candy, 'why, he don't get on at all; he don't know nothin' o' nothin'. And how shud he, sir, he havin' been at schule all his life?' Oh! he isn't one for much schulin', isn't Candy."

"Obviously not."

"He says it's all very well for the gentry as haven't got nothin' to du but to turn their heads inta pottin' sheds and rubbish-heaps; but they as has got their own livin' to get can't afford to waste their time over such stuff as book-learnin'."

Laurence smiled: "I am afraid then that Candy doesn't share my late grandfather's weakness for books, as shown in the library upstairs."

"Not he, sir; yew don't find any nonsense o' that sort about Candy. And he says, if he had been in yewr place, beggin' yewr pardon, sir, he'd sune have sold all that waste paper upstairs for what he could get for it, grandfather's will or no grandfather's will."

"But, you see, my grandfather's will made it not

only impossible for me to sell his library, but also obliged me to preserve it at great expense."

"Well, it's a good thing as yewr grandfather's will has yew to deal wi', sir, instead o' Candy; for Candy wud ha' stood no nonsense o' that kind. He'd ha' sold the whole bag o' tricks for what he cud get for it—that he wud, if all the grandfathers in Christendom had tried to stop him, and all the grandmothers, tew."

"Then I am afraid the law would have stepped in and prevented him."

"Oh! he don't hold wi' the law any more than he do with schulin', don't Candy. He says as the law is all very well for poachers and criminals and the like o' them, but that it hasn't no right to come interferin' wi' honest men; and if it iver dares to interfere with him he'll sune show it its place, says he. And so he wud: I shud like to see the law as dare interfere with Candy when onst his spirit is up."

"I suppose when you were living in Norfolk you sometimes saw the Prince of Wales on his way to and from Sandringham," suggested Laurence, who always enjoyed drawing Mrs. Candy out.

But Mrs. Candy seemed to be shocked at the suggestion: "No, no, sir; I ain't as warldly as all that, though His Royal Highness did pass through the station of the village where my brother Jacob Henry lived. 'Come and see the Prince of Wales go through, Lizzie,' says Jacob Henry to me one day when I was a-stayin' wi' him. 'No, Jacob Henry,'

says I, 'I'm not so warldly,' says I; 'now if it had been Abraham with Lazarus in his bosom, a-sittin' in a first-class carriage, I might a-gone,' I says; 'but not for all the kings o' the earth,' says I, 'will I run half a mile as hard as I can, just on the top o' my dinner.' And no more I wud."

"You were most sensible, Mrs. Candy, not to allow that feeling of loyalty, which is so apt to run riot in England, to lead you into indigestion."

"Just what I thought, Mr. Baxendale, sir. What wud the Prince o' Wales and all the crowned heads o' Europe have cared if my dinner that day had lain on my chest like a lump o' lead? Not they: it wud have made no difference to them whatsoever. But it wud ha' made all the difference to me, I can tell yew; and I wudn't ha' risked it, no, not for the Emperor o' China or the Pope o' Rome."

"By the way, Mrs. Candy," Laurence said more seriously, "I suppose you wouldn't go for your holiday by yourself and leave Candy to look after the Hall?"

"Laws-a-mercy, Mr. Baxendale, what be yew a-thinkin' of? Why, I wudna go on a journey without Candy to tell me which way I was a-goin', no, not if yew was to crown me. Do yew think I'm a-goin' to set up a lot o' guards and porters and engine-drivers and such above my own wedded husband, and take their word instead of his? No, sir; I trust I knows my dewty as a wife better than that."

"You see, Candy could take your ticket at Silverhampton and put you into the train; and your own relations could meet you at the other end."

But Mrs. Candy stood firm: "No, sir, I took him for better and for worse, and for better and for worse I'll stick to him. And if for worse don't mean them horrid screechin' railway journeys, I'm sure I don't know what it du mean. No, sir: unless Candy goes wi' me to Norfolk, to Norfolk I don't go."

Like all truly sensitive people, Laurence Baxendale could not bear to give pain: and the disappointment which his suggestion had called into Mrs. Candy's ruddy countenance was too much for him. "Well, then, I suppose Candy must go, too. Do you know anybody who will come and take care of the Hall in your absence?"

"Well, sir, it's not for the likes of me to go teachin' the gentry, and passin' my remarks on what they may please to du," said Mrs. Candy in the tone of those who are about to do the very thing they deprecate. Did the apology, "Far be it from me to speak irreverently," ever precede anything save the most startling irreverence; or the prefatory clause, "I never repeat malicious gossip," ever introduce any item of information which was not in direct opposition to the Ninth Commandment? And Mrs. Candy was but as her fellows—and her betters. "But if yew ask my opinion, I think as it will du more harm than good to bring strangers into the Hall, pokin'

their noses into where they've no business, and their fingers into where they've less."

"You mean that it would be better to shut the place up altogether for a week or two than to trust any temporary caretakers?"

"I du, sir. Yew see, me and Candy has known yew from a baby, sir, and the family afore that; and so we've patience with all that nonsense about takin' such care o' that old rubbish-heap upstairs. But strangers wud have no patience with it—how cud they?—seein' as waste paper is waste paper all the world over. So if they didn't take proper care of all the rummage that this old house contains, who cud blame 'em? Certainly not me nor Candy," continued the worthy matron, feeling that if suspected persons passed successfully the ordeal by Candy they were innocent indeed. "Why, last week's newspaper ain't no good, much less them old books as has been writ ever so much afore last week, or the week afore that."

"Then you would just lock up the house and leave it?"

"I should, sir. Yew see, nobody has a key to it except yew and her leddyship, so nobody cud get in to do any mischief, for there's shutters to all the downstair windows; and yew cud look in every tew or three days to see as all was goin' on well. And there wudn't be any need o' fires this weather to keep the place aired, for I'd draw up the blinds to the upstair windows, so as the sun cud get in and keep

the damp out o' them old books: and there is no damp to speak of at this time o' year. If I was yew, sir, I'd rather leave the place empty than have folks runnin' all over it as I didn't know."

"There's Williamson and his wife at the Home Farm. They would come up and stay here while you and Candy were away," suggested Laurence.

"Oh, of course, Mr. Baxendale, you knows your own business best," replied Mrs. Candy, in a tone of voice which implied that if there was one person on earth who did not know anything at all about Mr. Baxendale's business that person was Mr. Baxendale himself. "If yew can trust Mrs. Williamson, yew can trust her, and that's an end o' that."

"Oh! of course I should be guided by you," Laurence hastened to say with culpable weakness; "but Mrs. Williamson always seems to me to be a tidy woman with plenty of work in her."

"Well, sir, if yew think so, yew think so; and if yew does believe in her, yew does." Mrs. Candy was evidently of opinion that faith in a myth is better than no faith at all.

"But what is your objection to Mrs. Williamson?"

"I hasn't any objection to her, sir, far from it: but I've looked into her house, I have; and what I've seen, I've seen." Fatima herself could not have spoken more mysteriously of Bluebeard's locked-up room than did Mrs. Candy of the interior of the Williamsons.

Laurence owned to considerable curiosity: "But what did you see, Mrs. Candy?"

The lady, thus urged, shook her head and pursed up her lips with the usual firmness to those who have decided *not* to say a thing and intend to say it at all costs. "It's not for me to speak evil o' my neighbours one wi' another, even if she du sit in her best parlour on a week-day and wear out the albums and the antimaccassars in a way as is neither decent nor respectable."

"You must tell me more, please, Mrs. Candy; I really don't quite grasp the full meaning of Mrs. Williamson's behaviour at present."

Mrs. Candy extenuated nothing, nor set down aught in malice: "Yew see, it's this way, sir," she began in a calm and judicial voice; "our best parlour is given up to the Sabbath, so as Sunday shall be different from the days o' the week, as it ought to be; and I hold that to sit in the best parlour on any other day but Sunday is nothin' more nor less than Sabbath-breakin'. Why, sir, I'd as soon think o' readin' the Bible on a week-day as o' lookin' at the family albums. Only t' other day Candy says to me, 'Lizzie,' he says, "there's some talk in the papers o' openin' museums and picture galleries and the like on Sundays: but I don't hold with it,' he says; 'if yew begin makin' Sunday as cheerful-like as a week-day, what'll become o' the religion o' England?' he says. Oh! he doesn't hold wi' Sabbath-breakin', doesn't Candy."

"Still there are two sides to the question," Laurence feebly expostulated, "as there are to most questions, I suppose."

But such sophistry was not for the like of Mrs. Candy: "Yes, sir, so there be—a right side and a wrong side; and yew can't have tew right sides to anything, any more than yew can have tew right-handed boots or tew right-handed breeches; leastways so Candy says, and he's got to the root o' most things, has Candy."

Laurence knew when he was beaten, so held his peace.

"Yew see, sir," Mrs. Candy reverted to her former subject, "Candy and me wud be back from our holiday in a fortnit at most—that wud give us plenty o' time to neaten the grave up and to give a start to Maria Jane's twins: and there cudn't much harm come to the Hall in that time—particularly at this season o' the year, when there's no fires needed, and considerin' as no one has a key to it save her leddyship and yewrself."

Laurence nodded. He did not think it necessary to mention before Mrs. Candy those keys which he had lent to Nancy Burton. That, he felt, was his business—not Mrs. Candy's—nor another's.

"Very well, Mrs. Candy," he said, rising to take his leave; "you and your husband shall have your holiday at once; and I'll make a point of coming up to the Hall every two or three days to see that all is going on right in your absence."

So it was arranged that Mrs. Candy should go to sojourn among her own people for a fortnight, and that Mr. Candy should accompany his better half in the train for fear she should fall out by the way.

On his way home from Baxendale Hall by the lanes, Laurence caught sight of a blue-robed figure (it was one of Nancy's whims always to wear blue) in the distance; and he accordingly quickened his steps until he overtook it. Now, it is an extremely interesting fact that if two lovers go to a particular place with the express and sole purpose of meeting each other, they are in a mutual agony of fear lest they should miss. To the ordinary onlooker the only remarkable thing about this fear is its utter groundlessness. In any other walk of life if A. went to a place at a time when he knew B. was bound to be there, he would conclude for a certainty that he would meet B. and would suffer no further doubts upon the question: if he knew, moreover, that B. was going to that place for the especial purpose of meeting him, his doubts as to their eventually seeing each other face to face would be still more completely set at rest. But not so with lovers. Oh, dear me, no! He knows and she knows—with a certainty which no mere friendly or business-like relation would justify—that the object of meeting each other is the sole consideration which, for the time being guides their respective steps: nevertheless, they are both tortured with agonising doubts as to whether—in a space probably of some dozen

yards or so, totally uninhabited save by their two selves—they shall succeed in catching sight of each other; and whether, having so caught sight, they shall succeed in exchanging those few words which are as daily bread to their starving hearts. It never seems to occur to them that nothing short of a miracle could keep them apart in the circumstances; nor to wonder why the natural laws which govern the universe are likely to be suspended for their special discomfiture. If they go to the same place at the same hour they are bound to meet, unless gravitation be nothing but a passing whim, or the shadow on the dial be as liable to be turned back as it was in the reign of Hezekiah; any one in his senses would understand as much as that. But who is in love and in his senses at the same time? And if he were, who would care to be in love at all? Love stiffened by sense is as unwholesome as cream tinctured with boracic acid; and both are the signs and the product of an over-civilised state of society.

As no natural law was suspended and no miracle wrought in order to keep them apart, Laurence and Nancy met each other in the lanes on that particular summer afternoon; and Laurence—after certain immaterial remarks which had no bearing whatsoever on the subject in hand—informed Nancy of Mrs. Candy's promised holiday, enriching the recital by such flowers of the good lady's conversation as he was able to recall.

"I'm glad the dear old soul is going away," said

Nancy when he had finished; "she'll thoroughly enjoy dosing the twins and weeding the grave; and it'll be a splendid occasion for you to—oh! I forgot, I beg your pardon."

"Forgot what, my darling?"

"A promise I once made to you. That is the worst of making promises—you never can remember them. And how can you keep them if you have forgotten their existence?"

"Do you mean to say you forget promises? Oh, Nancy!"

"Forget them?—I should just think I do. I once promised father never to read a certain book: but as I've forgotten the name of the book, how on earth can I keep my promise? And I once promised Nora not to flirt with a particular man: but as I've completely forgotten who it was, how can I keep that promise either? And then you are always making me promise not to repeat things, which is very absurd: because promising you that I won't tell things doesn't mean that I shan't tell them—it only means that I shall make the people I tell them to promise not to tell you that I've told."

Laurence laughed: "Nancy, you really are an incorrigible."

"I can't help that. And you've made me promise scores and scores of things besides—always to be something, and never to be something else—and always to think this, and never to think that—and

hundreds of other things, which for the life of me I can't remember."

"You naughty, unkind child!"

"Well, that's the truth. So if I break my promises to you, don't be touchy and think it was rudeness on my part. If I remember them, I'll keep them fast enough; but I'm sure not to, so there's an end of it."

When Laurence Baxendale arrived at Poplar Farm, having parted with Nancy at the iron gate which barred the field-path at Wayside, he explained to his mother as briefly as he could the arrangement he had made with Mrs. Candy. He hated having to mention the subject to Lady Alicia, and he hated himself for hating it.

But it never occurred to him to regret having spoken of the matter to Nancy Burton.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BURNING OF BAXENDALE.

Higher the flames rose, higher and higher,
When Baxendale Hall was made fuel of fire.

Two days after the Candys had started on their holiday the weather broke. Up to that time—the middle of August—it had been a wonderful summer; one of those summers which stand out in men's memories as a type of all that a summer ought to be. But suddenly the face of the heavens changed: the rain fell, and then there blew a tremendous gale. For several years past there had not been such a storm of wind in Mershire: it tore the tiles off the roofs, and made merry with the slates, and opened doors without knocking, and broke the windows, until Silverhampton presented the appearance of a city which had been besieged rather than of a comfortable manufacturing town. In the country the wind behaved no better. It tossed the big trees about, tearing them up by their roots till it looked as if some giant hand was playing a monster game of spilikins in the woods: and as the ground heaved and shook with the efforts of the tree-roots to escape from their prison at the bidding of the storm fiend, it seemed as

if an earthquake were following in the wake of the wind. As it was still summer, the trees had on all their leaves; and that made them less able to bow before the gale, and more liable to be overthrown by it.

Right opposite the west front of Baxendale Hall there stood a huge old elm tree which was known as "The Luck of the Baxendales," because there was a tradition to the effect that whenever it fell ill-luck would overtake the house of Baxendale; but as it had cheerfully remained upright, clapping its hands and tossing its huge arms about, while poverty drove the Baxendales out of their home and left their habitation desolate, their luck and it seemed to have parted company, and the tradition was now held to be of no effect. But the great gale accomplished what the poverty of the Baxendales had failed to bring about: it tore up the roots of the old elm tree and laid its proud head in the dust.

"What do you think?—the old elm tree at the back of the Hall has been blown down," shouted Laurence on the morning after the gale to Nancy, whom, by some strange accident, he had come across in the lanes.

But the wind, which, though less violent than it had been, was still inimical to conversation, carried his words eastward into Silverhampton, instead of to the little pink ear for which they were intended.

"What?" shouted Nancy in response, holding on her hat, while the gale played havoc with her dress

till she looked like a little blue flag. "I can't hear a word that you say in this awful wind."

Laurence came nearer and repeated the piece of information in a still louder key. This time it reached its destination.

"The tree that is called 'The Luck of the Baxendales' ?" asked Nancy.

Laurence nodded. It was the weather for signs and signals rather than for spoken words.

"Oh! what a pity," Nancy exclaimed; "I do hope it won't spoil your luck."

Laurence smiled somewhat grimly. "It can't very well spoil what doesn't exist, my dear; and for it to fall now seems to be a little behindhand, considering that we've been about as unlucky as we could be for the last twenty years."

"It does seem the wrong way about," gasped Nancy, struggling against the wind: "like wagging a dog's tail to make him good-tempered, don't you know?"

"Come up to the Hall and have a look at the tree," Laurence entreated when again the wind gave him the chance of being heard.

"All right." Nancy was always what Anthony called "a good plucked one."

"I'll take care of you and see that no branches fall on your pretty head," said Laurence, with as much tenderness in his voice as such a gale permitted.

"It isn't a pretty head just now, as it happens: I've

put on an ugly hat on purpose, so that the wind shall not spoil more beauty than is absolutely needful."

"Keep to the windward of the trees and as far away from them as possible," was Laurence's warning. "I daren't walk with Amaryllis in the shade on such a day as this."

"And the wind is so busy with the tangles of Næera's hair that there isn't one left for you to play with," added Nancy.

"It's a good thing you aren't made after the fashion of Handel's young woman who found that where'er she walked trees crowded into a shade; it's bad enough keeping clear of them when they are fixtures in this weather; but if they took to running after you in crowds, I really don't know what I should do."

Nancy laughed with as much breath as she could command at the minute.

"I say, darling, you aren't frightened at crossing the Park in such a fearful gale, are you? Because if you are I'll take you home before I go," enquired Laurence, after the next gust had subsided and the very wind itself was stopping to take breath.

Nancy pouted: "I believe you are tired of me and want to get rid of me."

"Do you? Well, if you believe that you'll believe anything."

"I do. I believe that you've seen somebody you like better than me, and that another woman's eyes have put my nose out of joint."

"What a little goose you are! You know that for me there never has been and never will be any woman in the world but you. But are you sure you're not frightened of this awful storm?"

Nancy looked up at him with fearless eyes: "Good gracious, no! I couldn't be frightened at anything when I am with you. That's the beauty of being in love—it makes fear impossible; and fear is such a horrid thing. Why, if you were with me, I dare drive down Piccadilly in a Victoria, and merely smile when I felt a reckless hansom in my pocket and a blood-curdling omnibus in my back hair; and if you were there too I shouldn't mind going through a whole battle with nothing but a waterproof and an umbrella to keep the bullets off."

"My sweetheart, what a dear, foolish little child you are!"

And so these two fearless young people ploughed their way in the teeth of the westerly gale right up to the Hall, and stood together by the ruins of the old elm tree. And with Nancy at his side Laurence felt as unafraid of ill-luck, and as ready to meet and overcome it, as Nancy felt with regard to the congested traffic of London or the perils of war: which showed that as yet he underrated the strength of those mysterious principalities against which men have to wrestle rather than against flesh and blood.

While Laurence and Nancy were fighting their way up to the Hall, Mr. Arbuthnot called to see Rufus Webb, and found that the disturbance of the

elements had worked the fanatic into a state of semi-insane enthusiasm.

"It is a tremendous gale," Arbuthnot remarked, after the usual greetings, "and will do a lot of damage, I'm afraid."

Rufus had a rapt look upon his face: "A great strong wind rent the mountains," he murmured, "but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake, a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small Voice."

Michael, being a man of much tact, fell in with Webb's mood: "And what did the still small Voice say? Did it encourage the prophet to shut himself out from the sympathy and communion with his fellows? No; it asked, 'What doest thou here, Elijah?'—a question which that same small Voice is asking every one of us and waiting for our answer."

"Well, God knows that I—vile as I am—can still say truthfully with Elijah, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts;' that at least I can answer."

"I know you can; and do you think that that answer will satisfy God now any more than it satisfied Him in Elijah's time? Not it. He will send you away from the mountains, as He sent His prophet of old, back through the wilderness of Damascus to the anointing of earthly rulers and the choosing of human friends."

"You mean that I shut myself up too much from my kind?"

"I do. I know that when once one has stood upon the Mountain of Transfiguration, the molehills of the valley seem contemptibly small and petty in comparison: nevertheless, it is among the molehills of the valley that our daily tasks lie. And I do not believe that it is only in order to make us despise and chafe against these molehills that we are allowed to stand upon the mountain top now and again: I believe that it is rather in order that we may thereby learn that the molehills are but molehills after all, and are but for a moment, while the mountains stand fast forever."

But Rufus shook his head: "I am not upon the mountain tops: I am down in the deep waters."

"So we all are now and then. But the path of duty lies no more permanently through the deep waters than upon the mountain tops."

Just then a sudden gust of wind seemed as if it were going to blow the cottage down.

"What a gale it is!" exclaimed the vicar: "I don't remember such a wind as this since I first came to Mershire."

"And after the wind an earthquake," repeated Rufus, with the rapt look again upon his face.

"Well, there does actually seem to be an earthquake going on, if you see how the ground is shaking and heaving with the upheaval of the trees. That is the worst of elms: their roots lie so near the sur-

face and are so widespread that they fall sooner than any other tree, and in their fall do more damage." Mr. Arbuthnot tried to bring the soothsayer back into everyday life.

"And after the earthquake a fire," continued Rufus, in a weird, monotonous voice of one who is speaking with strange tongues.

"Well, I only hope there won't be a fire anywhere, for this wind would fan it into an uncontrollable flame in no time. If once a fire were lighted, there would be no putting it out in such a gale as this."

"And after the fire a still small Voice. It was not until the fire had done its worst that the still small Voice was heard. Mark that! It is not until our possessions have been destroyed and our souls purged so as by fire that the still small Voice speaks to us—and, speaking, can induce men to listen to it."

As Rufus Webb sat with this mystic look upon his face, the vicar was able to notice how sadly lined with care and want that haggard face was. In spite of all his eccentricity, Rufus was still a gentleman: and it was very difficult for one gentleman to intimate to another that the former does not believe the latter has enought to eat. Nevertheless, that was the idea which struck Mr. Arbuthnot, and which filled his warm heart with distress—distress all the more poignant because he saw no way of setting things right. There was something about Rufus Webb—some trace of inborn gentlehood and former culture—which forbade any one to take the shadow of a

liberty with him, be his behaviour and his conversation never so insane.

Knowing that a religious train of thought was apt so quickly to degenerate into frenzy in the mind of the ex-missionary, Michael endeavoured to turn the talk into less exciting channels. "By the way, have you heard that this wind has brought down the huge elm tree that stood on the other side of Baxendale Hall?"

He had touched a responsive chord. Webb turned to him at once with awakened interest: "The great elm tree which was named 'The Luck of the Baxendales,' do you mean?"

"Yes. It must have stood there for two or three hundred years."

"And I am glad, glad that it has fallen, and that ill-luck will henceforward dog the footsteps of Laurence Baxendale. Is it well for that young man to find rest in the house of his fathers, and to marry the woman of his choice, and to have children at his desire, and to leave the rest of his substance to his babes? Nay; better for him that his house shall be left unto him desolate, and that sorrow and poverty shall drive him to the one refuge where true help is to be found! For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

So Webb rambled on; and Arbuthnot—having in vain tried to reduce the hermit to a more reasonable state of mind—took his leave: but as he went away, his heart was heavy within him, because of that

SINKING DOWN ON A FALLEN TREE WHICH LAY BY THE ROADSIDE.

actual want which he felt sure was undermining the health of Rufus, and yet which no one dare take the liberty of recognising and relieving.

During all the day the gale continued, and at sunset the wind fell and was succeeded by a great calm. The next morning dawned beautifully fine and hot, but with a stillness which seemed almost oppressive after the boisterous weather of the last few days. There was not a cloud to be seen; and although those Jeremiahs among men who cannot feel warm without prophesying thunder, or cold without foretelling snow, did predict a thunderstorm, no thunder came, for the simple reason that the sky was so clear there was nowhere for it to come from. It was one of those days when even to the hale and hearty the grasshopper becomes for the time being a burden: there was no life in the air, and effort seemed unendurable if not impossible. Even the wings of Love himself could not fly far afield in such an atmosphere; so in the afternoon Laurence and Nancy betook themselves to those untrodden ways which lay nearest to Wayside and Poplar Farm, and which required the minimum of locomotion in attaining thereto.

"It's too hot to walk up to the Hall this afternoon," Nancy said, sinking down on a fallen tree which lay by the roadside. "Arthur and Ambrose have gone, as they wished to investigate the fall of the tree more minutely; and it never seems too hot for boys to do things. But it is too hot for us."

"Much too hot, sweetheart. Besides, there is no need to go: I was up there before breakfast this morning to see if the gale had done any more damage."

"And I was up there just after breakfast to see if I could find a missing light in *The Queen* acrostic for this week."

"Oh! were you? What a pity you didn't tell me you were going, darling, and we'd have gone together."

"It didn't occur to me till this morning that I might find that particular light in a particular book. I did look out for you at the cross-roads, but as you were nowhere in sight I went on by myself. It was too hot to go far in search of anybody, or anything, the finding of which did not involve a prize."

"You horrid child, to think more of an acrostic prize than of me! Did you succeed in finding your missing light—for you certainly didn't deserve to?"

"Of course I did. I always get everything and deserve nothing: it is a much more satisfactory plan than getting nothing and deserving everything, as you do. But the whole place is rather in a mess after the gale, isn't it?"

"There are a few good tiles lying about, but no more trees are down near to the house, and no windows are broken, although the glass roof of one of the greenhouses was smashed in. But that won't matter; there were no plants of much value in that particular greenhouse; and those that were there I

have moved into a potting shed until Candy's return."

"Do you mean to say you removed them with your own hands in this heat? Oh, excellent young man!"

Laurence laughed: "Of course I did; I'm not made of sugar or salt, my dear, or any such melting material."

"Well, I couldn't have carried pots about when I reached Baxendale this morning; it was as much as I could do to walk so far on such a day as this," said Nancy.

"Poor little thing, did it feel the heat?" whispered Laurence, kissing her.

"Yes, it did; and what is more, the heat takes its fringe out of curl, which annoys it very much and spoils its good looks," replied Nancy, submitting to the embrace.

"Nothing of the kind! I won't allow you or anybody else to find fault with the fringe or the good looks of my young woman; so please remember that, Miss Burton."

After a few minutes' silence Laurence remarked: "You are very quiet this afternoon, sweetheart: is anything worrying you?"

"Oh, dear, no! things never do worry me. But it is too hot to be brilliant, or even to be affectionate," she added, with a laugh, edging away from her lover.

"You unkind child, to throw back a nice young man's affection in his teeth, when, according to

Shakespeare, you ought to be down on your knees, thanking Heaven fasting for my devotion. You aren't half grateful enough for having such a well set-up young man all round, as Mrs. Candy would say."

"Yes, I am; but it doesn't seem to me exactly the weather for rehearsing *The Huguenots* every three minutes as a *tableau vivant.*"

"Then let's change it for *The Black Brunswicker;* it would suit me every bit as well," suggested Laurence.

Nancy looked at him through her long eyelashes: "You really are very nice," she said, "when one doesn't consider you too closely."

"What a rude little girl! It would serve you right if I kept you at a distance and talked to you about the political situation and the decay of poesy, and things of that kind."

"I shouldn't mind it half as much as you would."

"So if I am such a fool as to amputate my own nose in order to spite your pretty little face, you won't prevent me?"

"Certainly not. Besides, I'm jealous of your nose —it is a much better shape than mine," said Nancy, stroking her own offending feature thoughtfully: "and I really don't see what you have done to deserve a better nose than I."

"I haven't—I really haven't: my conscience is quite clear on that score."

"Then why is your nose so superior to mine?"

"I'll give it up: ask another."

"Your eyes aren't quite as nice, though," said Nancy, more cheerfully.

"Nothing like; and as you've two superior eyes and I've only one superior nose, you're twice as well off as I am, after all. Two to one is a good working majority, don't you know?"

And so these two young people went on talking nonsense, little dreaming how short-lived such nonsense was doomed to be.

At sunset that evening the wind rose again, and for the whole of the night the westerly gale was more boisterous than ever. The wind had evidently been "scotched, not killed;" and it now awoke, as a giant refreshed with wine, and rushed to and fro across the heavens like some devastating fiend.

At about three o'clock in the morning Laurence was awakened by the violence of the gale, and roused himself sufficiently to look out of his window in order to see whether that ghastly game of spilikins was again going on in Baxendale Woods. He was struck by perceiving a rosy light opposite his window, which at first sight he mistook for the first flush of dawn; but, as he grew more wide awake, he realised that the sun does not rise in the west, and that therefore there must be some other reason for this phenomenon; and by the time he was thoroughly awake, the awful truth dawned upon his drowsy brain that Baxendale Hall was in flames.

Even while he stood spellbound at the first horror

of the sight, tongues of flame darted up into the summer sky, and clouds of smoke rose up and blotted out the stars which hung low over the horizon line. Yes, Baxendale Hall was on fire, and the ancient prophecy had once more come true. There was no doubt of it. For a second, which seemed like an eternity, Laurence stood still, feeling—as we all feel under the first shock of some great calamity—that the terrible thing which was now happening had been happening ever since the foundation of the world. There seemed no prehistoric time when Baxendale Hall had not been on fire—no half-forgotten date when the third part of the ancient doom was as yet unfulfilled.

Then with a great effort he roused himself and awakened his household; and hastily dressing, he made his way, as well as he could in the teeth of such a wind, up to the scene of the disaster, followed by such servants and labourers as he had been able to awaken on the road. But it was too late. In such a gale as this, the fire ran on apace: and no human agency could extinguish it after it has once taken a hold. The old library, with its reams of dried-up parchment and paper, acted as fuel to the flames; and although Laurence and his followers did all in their power to extinguish it, their efforts were utterly futile.

The fire, however, had only touched the first and upper storeys: the ground floor was still intact. So, as the news of the disaster spread wider and more

help came, the men succeeded in saving the downstairs rooms and their contents—which contents were, after all, nothing save ordinary furniture.

But when the day broke and the full extent of the catastrophe was revealed, it was found that the upper part of Baxendale Hall—including the fine old pictures and the still finer old library—was reduced to a heap of ashes.

CHAPTER XII.

SUSPICION.

> To give a dog an unrespected name,
> As hanging seems to be about the same.

THE burning of Baxendale Hall caused a great sensation, not only in Mershire, but throughout all England. In the first place, people were genuinely sorry that a house containing such fine pictures and so magnificent a library should be destroyed; it was a loss to the whole country as well as to the possessor: and in the second place they were devoured by curiosity as to who was the culprit who had actually set the Hall on fire. Somebody must have done it—on that point all were agreed: but there was much discussion—and for many a long day—as to who that somebody could be. Some said one, some said another; and none was weary of going over the question again and again, sifting and re-sifting the evidence. The temptation to transfigure molehills into mountains, and to discover mares' nests—to find something new to talk about, and to pluck the mote out of a brother's eye—in short, to relieve the tedium of life in a manner which would not have found favour in the eyes of

the first Bishop of Jerusalem proved too much for the British public: they discussed the matter until they gradually lost their power of discrimination between what actually, and what they supposed, had happened; they revelled in guesses as to whether A. or B. could possibly have set fire to the Hall, until they believed A. or B. really had done so; and they hoped that C. or D. had not been guilty of the crime, until C. and D. stood red-handed in their minds' eyes. As for the curse, it was meat and drink to them; and they tried to find out what was thrice as great as King or State with an energy which was worthy of a weightier problem. And all this, be it noted, not from any enmity against the present owner of Baxendale Hall, nor from any wish to work him harm, but merely from a passionate thirst for excitement and an unthinking intention to slake that thirst at all costs. Of course, if the Hall had not been insured, or had only been insured for a modest sum, none of this gossip would have arisen: the catastrophe would have been a nine-days' wonder, and that would have been the end of it. But a hundred thousand pounds was too big a sum to be lightly passed over: and it also provided in the minds of the really well-meaning, though actually mischief-making, public a motive why Laurence Baxendale should have burned down the house of his fathers and placed himself in danger of the law; for human nature, alas! is such that in all courts of justice a motive for a crime on behalf of a certain

person is strong evidence in favour of that particular person's having committed that particular crime. Wherefore we daily pray, "Lead us not into temptation."

When the news of the disaster was brought to the Burtons' breakfast table by excited menials the following morning, Nancy's heart stood still for a second, and then began to beat like a sledge hammer. She could hardly speak, so strong was the thrill that ran through her—that thrill, half of triumph and half of fear, which suddenly runs through all of us when suddenly we find our unworthy wishes granted, our unholy intentions fulfilled. She had made up her mind that Baxendale Hall should be burned down so that she should attain her heart's desire and marry Laurence. That the old curse should come to pass was the thing she had longed for: it did not occur to her that, though offences must come, woe to those by whom they come. At present she only thought what a delightful world it was after all, and how lucky she was to have won the love of such a man as Laurence Baxendale.

She and Nora walked up to the Hall immediately after breakfast to see what damage had actually been wrought, accompanied by their two brothers, who regarded the burning of Baxendale as a treat specially prepared for their greater enjoyment of the summer holidays. The rooms on the ground floor were still standing; and though their contents had

been sadly spoilt by the water which had been thrown upon them, they were not destroyed. But the ground floor was all that was left of Baxendale Hall; and even these rooms had been robbed of their ceilings, and stood open to the ravages of wind and weather. The fire had evidently begun in the library and ascended, devouring everything that barred its upward course. The old books and manuscripts had been as tinder to the flame, and the pictures had not been much better. Then, the wind being so high, when once the flames had a start they literally travelled as wild-fire; there was no possibility of quenching them; and so, in a few hours, the upper part of the fine old house had completely vanished.

Mr. Baxendale was on the scene of the ruins when Nancy and Nora and the boys arrived there; and Nancy was shocked to perceive how he had changed in that one night: he looked ten years older than when she parted from him the preceding afternoon; his face was white and set, and there was a stern look about his mouth which she had never seen before. It seemed strange, she thought, that what had so rejoiced her soul had turned Laurence into an old man: she had expected him to be so glad that he could marry her, that all regret at the loss of his home would be swallowed up; instead of which he seemed so preoccupied that he had hardly time to notice her at all.

The Burton girls did not stay long on the scene of the ruins. They saw that Laurence was really too busy to attend to them; so when they had gazed their fill on the wreck, they turned away, leaving their small brothers to that fuller enjoyment of the disaster which only the immature male mind could adequately appreciate. For a short time Nancy felt rather depressed by Laurence's apparent indifference; but her natural high spirits soon reasserted themselves, and comforted her with assurances of how happy she and he were going to be in the good time coming. And during the rest of that day, and for several days afterward, she built most delightful castles in the air for the occupation of herself and him. She did not see him again for nearly a week; but she easily accounted for this, since his time was naturally occupied with saving what he could out of the wreckage of his house and getting the place into order again. The fire had not touched any of the stables or outhouses; it was only the Hall itself that had suffered.

What Laurence himself was enduring at that time Nancy had not the ghost of an idea. It would have been impossible for her to understand, even if she had been told, how he was simultaneously trying to harden his heart against her, and longing to take her into his arms—how he was making up his mind to tell her that henceforward everything must be at an end between them, and at the same moment deciding that, come what might, he would marry her

on the income of the insurance money, and defy the world and whatever the world might choose to say. Nancy was one of those natures to whom conflict is an unknown quantity: St. Paul's testimony to the flesh lusting against the spirit was to her as the original Greek in which is was written. She might succumb to a temptation on Tuesday which she had safely resisted on Monday; that was quite possible; but she would never feel the full power of the temptation and the passionate desire to resist it at one and the same time. She might change her government with startling rapidity; but as long as the government was in power it was unanimous. Like the rest of us, she presumably had her guardian angel and her tempting demon in attendance, to guide her feet respectively in the narrow way that leads upward to life, and the broad path that goes downward to destruction: but in Nancy's case these two opposing influences made a sort of spiritual Box-and-Cox arrangement, and were never upon the ground at the same time. Therefore, she was spared the wear and tear of conflict, though not the agony of remorse.

"People are all wondering whether Baxendale burned down the Hall himself for the sake of the insurance money," remarked Anthony to his uncle one evening.

Nancy started up in amazement: "Then I'm certain he did not. It's a horrid lie! Laurence is the last man to do that sort of a thing." That her lover

himself should ever be suspected of the crime was a possibility that had never occurred to her.

But Anthony took no notice of her indignation: "What do you think, Uncle Richard?" he asked.

Mr. Burton laid down his newspaper and shook his head: "It is a queer business: I don't know what to think."

Nancy again rushed in: "Surely you don't think that Laurence did it?"

"Gently, my child, gently," her father replied: "I say I don't know what to think—I did not give any opinion on the matter."

"The world in general seems coming to this conclusion," said Anthony: "I've heard it from no end of people to-day."

"That is just like people!" exclaimed Nancy: "nasty things!"

"No," expostulated Mr. Burton judicially; "I do not think one can altogether blame the public for suspecting Mr. Baxendale, when you remember how much he had to gain by the accident, and also when you consider that the public do not know the man as we know him. I am bound to say that if I had not met Baxendale personally—if I knew nothing in his favour or against him—I should need to be convinced of his innocence."

"You think things look rather black against him?" said Anthony.

"Yes, my boy, I am sorry to say that I do. Mind

you, I don't say that I think Baxendale burned down his own house; I only say that I am not surprised at the world in general suspecting that he did."

Nancy looked frightened: "But why, father?"

"First, because it was to his interest to do so. Not only does he come into a large sum of money through the burning down of the Hall, but he also is relieved from paying a yearly tax which there is no doubt was often a great strain upon his slender resources. In short, the accident turns Baxendale from a poor man into a comparatively rich one."

Anthony nodded: "Yes, that's true enough; and there is no doubt that this is a consummation devoutly wished by others than our friend Baxendale."

"So much for the motive of the crime," continued Mr. Burton: "now let us look at the evidence. The caretakers of the Hall were sent away on a holiday by Baxendale, and no one is put there in their place: thus the house is quite uninhabited. Further, the fire obviously started upon the first floor and travelled upward: the ground floor is untouched: this indubitably proves that the fire began from the inside, and also from the upper storey; for no one could have set it on fire from the outside unless they had begun from the ground. The key of the outer door, and, mark you! the key of the upstairs library, were in Laurence Baxendale's possession, Mrs. Candy having given up all the keys into his hands before she left home. The above facts are public

property: and can you blame the public from arriving at an obvious conclusion?"

"It does look rather queer," Anthony allowed: "and you think it impossible for the fire to have been lighted from without?"

"Utterly impossible, I should say. All the windows were carefully fastened, and there were no ladders anywhere about: therefore, if the house was fired from outside, it must have been fired from the ground and not from upstairs."

Nancy looked very angry: "It is rank lunacy to imagine for a moment that Laurence was capable of doing such a thing," she said.

Her father took no notice of her interruption: "Baxendale admits he went all over the house on the very morning before it was burned, to see whether any windows had been broken by the gale; in that case—had the fire already been smouldering—he must have discovered it."

"Besides, it couldn't very well have been smouldering in the summer," added Anthony, "because there hadn't been any fire in the place for months."

"There had not. Baxendale admits that no fire, except the one in the kitchen for the Candys to cook by, had been lighted for many weeks; and that particular fire could not have been responsible for the mischief, as the kitchens are practically untouched."

"And of course the Candys hadn't been cooking there for over a week."

"Exactly. Had they left any lighted coals behind

"DO YOU MEAN THAT HE WON'T GET THE HUNDRED THOUSAND POUNDS?"

them, the place would have been burned down a week or more ago. Yes," Mr. Burton looked very serious, "I am bound to say the case seems very black against Baxendale, and I am afraid he will have a lot of trouble with the insurance people about it; they won't be very likely to pay up until things are made to look a little less suspicious."

Nancy's face grew very white: "Do you mean that he won't get the hundred thousand pounds?" Her heart seemed to stand still: surely this thing had not all been done for nothing!

"I should doubt it," replied Mr. Burton: "the whole business has a very suspicious flavour. Even putting upon it the most favourable construction, Baxendale has been extremely unlucky: for everything—even to the smallest trifle—bears witness against him."

"Where did you get hold of all these details?" Anthony asked.

"From Baxendale himself at the Club. He was talking to half-a-dozen men, including myself, and told us all that I have told you about the incidents of the fire. He made no secret of the facts of the case."

There was a long silence. Mr. Burton drew his brows together, and went over the evidence again in his own mind. He hated to think evil of his neighbour, but the case against Laurence Baxendale certainly stood out in somewhat glaring colours. Anthony drummed with his fingers upon the table, and

thought what an unlucky dog Baxendale was, and how sorry he felt for him. And Nancy sat still, her air castle tumbling about her ears, and wished that she had never been born, or else that Baxendale Hall had never been burned—she did not mind much which.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LOSING OF THE KEYS.

Like Bluebeard's wife I lost the key:
Thenceforth it was not well with me.

"I SAY, Nora," said Nancy to her sister one afternoon a day or two after the foregoing conversation, "have you seen my keys tumbling about anywhere?"

"Your keys? no; have you lost them?"

"I must have done so; but goodness knows where!" replied Nancy, unconscious of the obviousness of her reply, since if goodness did know where the said keys were secreted they could hardly be described as lost.

"Which keys are they?"

"Oh! there is the key of my jewel-case, and the key of my cash-box, and the key of the box where all my old love-letters are kept, and—and—one or two others."

With the strange and sudden reserve which now and again attacks outspoken people, Nancy did not mention that the other two keys on the lost bunch were those of the front door and the library at Baxendale Hall. There is no secret so well kept as the secret which is guarded by the occasional reserve of

habitually unreserved natures. If a man is naturally secretive, we expect him to keep back something, and allow for the fact: but it never occurs to us that the usually outspoken are capable of keeping back anything; and so we conclude that the thing which they do not tell us does not exist. Hence the unreserved have powers of concealment which are denied to the naturally silent.

"How inconvenient!" exclaimed Nora.

"It is; most frightfully inconvenient! And it isn't a bit my own fault, because I distinctly remember taking them out of the pocket of my dirty muslin frock and putting them into the pocket of my clean one."

"I suppose one's pocket isn't really a very safe place for things."

"Yes, it is; the safest place in the world, because the things are always in one's own keeping, don't you see?—and other people can't get at them."

"Perhaps there was a hole in your pocket, Nan."

"Well, if there was, it wasn't my fault; it was Pearson's" (Pearson was the Miss Burtons' maid). "If a maid can't mend a hole in one's pocket, what is the good of having a maid at all?"

"Or perhaps you pulled them out with your pocket-handkerchief," Nora suggested further.

"Well, if I did, that wasn't my fault, either. What is the use of a pocket-handkerchief that you never take out of your pocket? It would be worse than a chained Bible or a captive balloon."

"Never mind, Nan. I can lend you my pearl beads till your jewel-case is opened again, or anything else that you need." Nora was a very good sister.

"Oh! the jewel-case doesn't matter, because it doesn't happen to be locked."

"Then if it is the cash-box, I can lend you as much money as you want till the keys are found again."

"That doesn't matter either, because I've spent all this quarter's allowance already, and the cash-box is empty."

"Then if it is only the old love-letters, I can lend you plenty of them, too, heaps upon heaps; and they're all pretty much the same, whoever they happen to be addressed to, so one set is as good as another."

"Good gracious! It isn't the love-letters that matter, because the lock of that box is broken; so that anybody can get at them, and as well without the key as with it."

"Then why bother about the keys at all?" asked sensible Nora.

"I wasn't bothering about them," replied Nancy hastily; "only it is stupid to lose things."

"Never mind; they are bound to turn up: our things always do."

And with that scanty comfort Nancy had to be content; and the conversation drifted into its wonted channel—namely, the Baxendale catastrophe.

"I wonder how Laurence will bear all these horrid

suspicions about him," remarked Nora thoughtfully; "he's just the sort of person to take them to heart."

"I know he is: that's just the bother."

"How do you mean?"

"Oh! I mean that's just the—the—bother, don't you know?" As shown in the matter of the keys, a reserve contrary to her nature seized Miss Burton when discussing anything connected with Mr. Baxendale. Until now she had been the most transparent person possible, only too glad to retail her innermost thoughts and feelings to any one who had patience to listen to them; but a new shyness, born of her love for Laurence, made her shrink from talking openly about her feelings toward him; and a new loyalty to him and everything concerning him made her shrink from talking openly of his feelings toward her.

"Do you mean that you think he'll die of a broken heart, or anything thrilling of that kind?" persisted Nora, who liked to sift a matter to its dregs.

"Oh, dear, no! But I'm afraid he'll mind awfully; and that he won't laugh at it as we should if people said we'd done anything queer."

"Yes; he's much more sensitive than we are; and that's a pity."

"It isn't a pity at all," Nancy fired up; "it only shows what tremendously fine material he is made of, and how immensely superior he is to us."

"He may be superior to us, but he isn't superior to Mr. Arbuthnot; and Mr. Arbuthnot says it is ener-

vating to care as much for the censure of other people as Laurence Baxendale cares."

"Mr. Arbuthnot should mind his own business and not interfere with things that don't concern him!"

"He doesn't interfere. He told me he was longing to tell Laurence how much he sympathised with him, and what a pity he thought it was that Laurence was taking the matter in the way he is taking it; but that he didn't venture to do so for fear Laurence should think he was taking a liberty."

"Then he ought to have spoken to Laurence and shown his sympathy with him, and advised him not to take idle gossip so much to heart. It was his duty as a parish priest to do so, and I think it has been a great neglect of duty on his part to leave poor Laurence so much to himself," cried Nancy, with fine disregard of the penultimate remark.

"But it is difficult not to leave people to themselves, when they persist in keeping to themselves: and you can't deny that Laurence Baxendale is doing that. He hasn't been near us since the Hall was burned down, and he used to drop in nearly every day."

A woman will always endeavour to prove a satisfactory *alibi* on the part of a man who has not been to see her as often as she thinks—and would rather die than own she thinks he ought; and the more clearly she sees that he could come if he had wished to do so, the more conclusively does she demonstrate

that his advent would have entailed a suspension of all the laws of nature. Wherefore Nancy quickly replied: "He couldn't possibly have come; he's been much too busy, putting his own fire out and consuming his own smoke, to pay calls. He's had no end of things to do since the Hall was burned down."

"I dare say he has; but, all the same, he might have looked in, just for five minutes, if only to tell us that he hadn't time to do so. However busy a person is, he has always time to write and say that he hasn't time to write: at least that has been my experience: and the principle is the same with calls as with letters."

"How silly you are, Nora! He has been up at the Hall every day, looking after things."

"I know that; but he might have come here before he went or after he came back, so that we might have told him how sorry we are for him."

"But that is just what Laurence would hate to see: that people were sorry for him."

"That's what I call so stand-offish and unneighbourly. I always like people to be sorry for me, even if they've no cause to be. I love to be pitied; it makes people so fond of one."

"And I hate to be pitied—there's the difference between you and me, my dear Nora. I adore admiration and I hate pity. Whatever I had to suffer, I couldn't bear anybody to be sorry for me, except—nobody." Nancy stopped just in time.

Nora gazed thoughtfully at her sister: "You and

Mr. Baxendale aren't really so very different, after all. I believe you are as proud underneath your outspokenness as he is underneath his stiffness, and you would hate to be pitied every bit as much as he does."

"Yes, I should, I should; and that's why I understand the reason of his not wanting to come and see us," explained Nancy, forgetting that she had just proved that there was no such reason, nor any need for one. "He feels that we should pity him and that we should show it; and that's just what he couldn't stand."

"Well, I can't grasp the idea. Do you mean to say, Nan, that if you were unhappy, it wouldn't comfort you to know that other people were sorry?"

"Good gracious, no! It would make everything a thousand times worse. I wish people to envy me; I don't even mind their disliking me; and I enjoy their disapproving of me. But all the time I insist on their regarding me as a brilliant young woman, and admiring me even while they detest."

"Well, you are funny! I'm not made a bit like that."

"I am; and it's a very good make, too."

"Do you mean to say you would rather be admired than loved?" asked Nora.

"Much rather. Admiration without love I delight in; but love without admiration would make me positively ill."

"I expect that is why you and Laurence get on

so well together; you are both proud, though in such different ways.

"Yes; we are alike in some things, but not in others—I only wish we were."

"You mean you wish he was more like us."

"Oh, dear, no! I wish I was more like him."

Nora was silent for a moment; then she said: "You admire him very much, don't you, Nancy?"

"I should just think I do. More than any one else I ever saw—or ever dreamed of." Nancy's reserve was beginning to thaw in the warm atmosphere of sisterly communion.

"I wonder if you admire him as much as I admire Michael Arbuthnot."

Nancy laughed the laugh of the scornful: "I should rather think so! There's so much more in him to admire."

But her sister was not going to stand that: "Oh, no, there isn't. In the first place, he is a layman; and in the second, he hasn't half as much to say for himself: nobody could admire him as much as the vicar."

"Well, I can and do." Nancy could be obstinate when occasion demanded it.

Nora's pretty forehead was wrinkled with thought: "Do you feel that you thoroughly understand Laurence Baxendale?" she asked; "I often wonder if you do."

Nancy paused for a second before replying: "Yes and no," she said slowly.

"Oh! how very interesting: do explain, Nan."

"I always know what he will do in any given circumstance, but I don't always know *why* he will do it. Just as I always know *when* I have hurt him, but hardly ever *how* I have hurt him."

Clever little Nora nodded: "I see: you know exactly where he will get to, but you don't know by what road."

"Yes; that's it. For instance, I understand that because he is hurt and sore he will not come near to any of us, for fear we should pity him: but why the idle gossip of the people about here should make him so sore and hurt him so much, I haven't the ghost of an idea. If I knew I hadn't done a thing I shouldn't care who said I had: in fact, I don't think I should care much for that, even if I had done it."

"He evidently is awfully cut up about it, or else he wouldn't shut himself up in the way he is doing."

"Yes; and I'll tell you more," exclaimed Nancy in a sudden burst of sisterly confidence: "I knew he'd go like this the minute I heard what nonsense people were talking; though why he should take it so hard I can't conceive."

"And it's such a mistake; because, as father says, it makes people think that their suspicions against him are correct."

Nancy wrung her hands: "I know, I know: that is where he is such a good, noble, stupid darling.

He has no idea of taking the course most advantageous to himself."

"It is a pity," sighed pretty Nora, with the not altogether unbearable sorrow which even the best of women feel over the follies of a brother-in-law (either *in esse* or *in posse*): "heaps of men would have turned this misfortune to their own account, and made quite a piece of good luck out of it."

"Do you think I don't know that?" And poor Nancy fairly groaned.

"But your dear Laurence never will. Now, if only he'd manage things the right way," continued Nora, "the whole affair would turn out for his good. He would be saved for the future from paying that tiresome insurance money, and would pocket a fortune of a hundred thousand pounds into the bargain. But some people have a knack of 'taking occasion by the hand' and others haven't."

"That's true. King Canute, for instance, was built after the Baxendale pattern when he rebuked his courtiers for saying that he could rule the waves *à la* Britannia; and then had his throne put where he knew the sea would wash over him, after he had specifically forbidden it to do so."

"Yes; that's exactly what Laurence would have done."

"Now, had I been in Canute's place," Nancy went on, "I should have placed my throne just half a yard above high-water mark, and I should have ordered the sea not to touch my feet; and of course it

wouldn't. Then I should have turned to my courtiers and said, 'See how right you were.' "

Nora laughed: "But they wouldn't have believed either you or themselves: they'd have seen through your little dodge and have known that the sea didn't obey you really."

"Of course they would; but they'd have winked behind my back to one another and said, 'She knows a thing or two, does Mrs. Canute!' Now, it seems to me that great men are like Canute; they show to the world how small a thing is their own greatness compared with the greatness of abstract truth. But clever men are like me; they adopt the greatness of abstract truth to increase their own greatness, and the world isn't always quite sure where the one ends and the other begins."

"I wonder which feels the nicer—to be great or clever."

"It depends on the sort of things that you enjoy most. If you want your biography to be read on Sunday afternoons by the next generation but one, be great; but if you want a peerage and Westminster Abbey, be clever."

"But I don't want either, as it happens," Nora explained.

"Then if you don't know what you want, what's the use of asking me how to get it, silly?"

"I do know what I want, though."

"Oh! if you only want a sweetheart for youth, and a husband for middle-age, and a widower to

plant forget-me-nots on your grave—which is all that most women want—you needn't trouble to be either great or clever: it will be quite enough if you do your hair nicely, and wear your best clothes when there's an off-chance of seeing him," laughed Nancy.

Nora nodded her head with satisfaction: "Oh! Nancy, how wise you are—about always wearing one's best clothes, I mean; but all the same, it comes expensive."

"It does; I know that from experience. I don't mind telling you as a secret that the return of the Baxendales from Drawbridge Castle has taken three months off the average life of a new hat, as far as I am concerned."

"I know; and yet it doesn't do to go out in an old one when there's a chance of meeting anybody." And Nora looked very serious.

"Of course it doesn't. Why, my dear, I once heard a dreadful tale—and it was quite true, too—of a man who was very sweet on a girl, and was just going to propose to her; but he happened to meet her at a party where she wore her last year's hat, and she looked so dowdy that it fairly choked him off."

"Then do you think men always like us less when we don't look nice, Nancy?"

"I think they always like us better when we do, which comes pretty much to the same thing. And why strain their affection, poor dears, to the breaking point? They are bound to love and cherish us

in sickness and poverty and all sorts of similar unpleasantnesses; but there is no absolute necessity for them to love and cherish us in shabby hats—and I should never worry them for an extra such as that."

"I see."

"After all," continued Nancy, "love—like a canal-bridge—ought not to be expected to carry more than the ordinary traffic of the district; and I consider a last year's hat on a par with a traction-engine—greatly in excess of the ordinary traffic, and to be feared accordingly."

"Yes, Nan, you are right: it doesn't do to strain even love too far."

There were a few minutes' pause, and then Nancy suddenly asked *à propos* of nothing: "Do you think that the end generally justifies the means when you want any particular thing?"

"Mr. Arbuthnot says it doesn't."

"Still, you see, he is a clergyman, and so would take stricter views of things than ordinary people would. Being a clergyman must make every day like Sunday, don't you think?"

"Then you should say that being a clergyman's wife would make every day like Sunday, too?" Nora's face was quite anxious as she put this question.

"Not quite; more like saints' days and harvest festivals and Christmas—neither one thing nor another. But don't you think that with an ordinary man or woman the end would justify the means?"

"I really don't know. Do you think it would?"

"Yes," replied Nancy seriously, "I do. I think that if you want a thing with all your heart—and are convinced that the thing will do you good and not harm if you get it—you are justified in leaving no stone unturned in trying to get that particular thing."

"But you wouldn't do anything that was actually wrong in trying to get it, would you, Nan?"

"Ah! there's my difficulty: it's so hard for me to know what is actually wrong and what isn't. I'm sure that different people have different kinds of consciences, just as they have different kinds of ears and eyes."

Nora looked puzzled: "How do you mean? I don't quite understand?"

"I mean that one man has a sensitive ear, so that he can tell at once if a note is out of tune; and another man hasn't. And one man has a sensitive eye, so that he can tell at once whether colours harmonize with each other or not; and another man hasn't. And one man has a sensitive conscience, so that he can tell at once if a thing is wrong; and another man hasn't."

"Then haven't you got a sensitive conscience, Nancy?"

"No, I haven't. I can't tell instinctively whether a thing is right or wrong, as some people can. If any one proved to my entire satisfaction that a thing was actually wrong, I wouldn't do that thing for

worlds: but I have no power of finding out for myself whether things are right or wrong."

"Haven't you? How funny!"

"Well, I can't help it if I'm made like that any more than unmusical people or colour-blind people can help it."

Nora looked doubtful: "I don't know; I'm afraid it's rather wicked of you."

"No, it isn't; it really isn't. Things that you can't help can't be wicked. You might just as well say that it is wicked to be deaf or blind or lame. It is better not to be, I admit: but there's no wickedness about the thing."

"Then do you mean to say, Nancy, that your conscience never acts at all—neither backward nor forward? If it doesn't keep you from doing things, doesn't it make you miserable after you've done them?"

"Not of itself. If other people prove to me that I ought not to have done something that I have done, then of course I'm dreadfully sorry that I did it. But I can't find out for myself that I oughtn't to have done it."

"Well," remarked Nora, "you can't say that you and Laurence are alike in this respect if you are in others, for a more active conscience than his I never came across."

"Active?—it's more than active! It's always in a state of eruption, like Vesuvius."

"And I should think you find it very difficult to understand this part of his character."

"I find it more than difficult," replied Nancy: "I find it utterly impossible. One thing, however, I have learned from observation and experience; and that is, however incomprehensible a man may be, it is always a mistake for a woman to try to translate him for the benefit of the audience. She only makes matters worse. Her translation doesn't render him an atom easier to be understood; but it has such an irritating effect on him that he makes himself more troublesome and obscure on purpose. If a woman wants to study men, she must do so in the original: it is useless attempting to publish them in one's mother tongue."

"Men are like poetry, aren't they? If you attempt to translate them, all the rhyme and most of the reason are lost in the process."

"What ever brings you girls stuffed up in the house this lovely afternoon?" exclaimed Anthony Burton, bursting into the room where the two sisters were sitting.

"I'm going out almost at once," replied Nancy, "but I thought the longer I waited the cooler it would get."

"I imagined that our beloved Nora would be attending Evensong this afternoon," remarked Nora's cousin, with a malicious twinkle in his eye: "but evidently I exaggerated that young woman's devotional tendencies."

"I am going to Evensong," Nora demurely replied; "I always go on Wednesdays and Fridays. But it isn't time to start yet," she added, looking at the clock; "it is only a quarter past four."

"Only a quarter past four by *this* clock," Anthony corrected her; "but other clocks tell a very different story."

Nora started up from her seat aghast: "Do you mean to say that this clock isn't right? What a nuisance! I was depending upon it, and thought I had heaps of time. Now I shall have to hurry, and get so disgustingly hot. What is the right time, Tony?" And poor Nora pinned on her hat and patted her fringe and looked for her gloves in a great hurry.

"That depends upon what country you are referring to," replied Anthony cautiously.

Nora stamped her foot impatiently: "Don't be silly, but tell me what time it is by your watch."

"The same as by your clock: fifteen minutes past four."

"But you said this clock was different from the others," argued Nancy, with a frown.

"So it is; quite different from all the clocks in Australia and America and Africa, and even on the other side of Europe. But I never said that it was different from the other clocks in this country; because it isn't."

The two girls burst out laughing.

"What a goose you are!" exclaimed Nora; "you did give me a fright."

"That, my dear child, was my intention."

"Well, at any rate, I shall start now," she added, "so as to be in church by five o'clock, as I don't want to hurry."

"I'm going out, too," said Nancy; and the two girls left the room together, and then went their several ways—Nora to church, and Nancy toward Baxendale in search of her lost keys.

As the latter walked across the field and through the iron gate into the lane, she looked at the ground in the hope of recovering her missing property; but in vain: not a sign of her keys could she see.

She had not been quite open with Nora as to where she remembered seeing them last: in that sudden reserve which attacks all women, even the most loquacious, when they first fall in love and realise that a stranger has stepped in between them and their own people, Nancy had never told her sister about Laurence's loan of the keys of Baxendale; and now she did not wish to mention the fact to anybody. She was clever enough to know that—in the present unpleasant state of affairs—the less that was said about any one's having access to the Hall the better. She did remember putting the keys into the pocket of a clean new muslin dress the morning before the fire; but she further remembered going up to Baxendale Hall that very day, and using both the key of the front door and the key of the library.

But from that time she had no recollection of seeing the bunch of keys at all. She had only just discovered her loss; but now it had occurred to her that as she had no further use for the keys she had better return them to Laurence: and on looking for them, in order to give them back to him, lo! they were nowhere to be found.

She had been searching for them all morning in the house and garden of Wayside; and now she thought she would walk up to Baxendale by her accustomed path and see if she could find them either on the way or there. But though her eyes were busy peering in every possible spot for the missing keys, her thoughts were filled with Laurence. In accordance with her usual light-heartedness, she resolutely put from her the thought that the burning of Baxendale Hall could be anything but a blessing ordained for the special purpose of putting her lover and herself in a position to marry: nevertheless, she could not quite banish the consciousness that hitherto the catastrophe, instead of bringing her and Laurence together, had served to drive them apart. It was very strange, she thought, that Laurence did not come to her in his trouble, as she would have gone to him had the trouble been hers: but there was a certain ghastly familiarity in the strangeness—a certain cruel conviction in the impossibility—which men and women experience when they realise that the incredible has come to pass and that the unbearable has to be borne.

Also there clutched at the heart of Nancy the first pangs of that world-old agony which comes to all of us when we first understand that there are limitations to our gift of consolation toward those whom we love best—that our power to love and our power to console are by no means synonymous. It is when our best-beloved are writhing from the effects of a wound which no touch of ours can heal or even soothe that we are brought face to face with the incapacities of human affection. We would gladly give our very lives if this pain could be in any way diminished: but it cannot: our powerlessness is as complete as is our sympathy. As we go through the world, we love and are loved by many; we cheer and are cheered by many; we help and are helped by many; but if, in the whole course of a lifetime, we find one human heart which we are able perfectly to heal and to comfort—one human hand which is able perfectly to heal and comfort us—we may of a truth consider ourselves blessed; for this is the greatest and the rarest gift vouchsafed to the sons and daughters of men.

As Nancy struggled against the conviction that Laurence had gone down into the shades of the prison-house and had shut the door in her face, in spite of all her longing to follow him, she suddenly raised her eyes and saw her beloved coming toward her along the grassy lane. She had looked for him at the cross-roads, and he was nowhere to be seen; so she had gone on her way with that heart-sickness

which is the invariable result of not finding the expected person at the accustomed place. But now she met him at another point of the road, on his way from Baxendale to Poplar Farm—not, as she was quick to perceive, on his way from Poplar Farm to Wayside; and the perception cut her like a knife.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FINDING OF THE KEYS.

Sometimes the finding of a thing
More sorrow than the loss doth bring.

NANCY's first impulse on meeting her lover in the lane was to rush into his arms and tell him straight out how her heart was overflowing with love and pity for him, and ask him why he had not come to her for comfort. But the sight of his face as he drew near nipped this inclination in the bud.

There was something about Laurence Baxendale —something intangible and indescribable, yet nevertheless to be felt by all who were brought into contact with him—which impressed other people in spite of themselves, and forbade them to take a shadow of a liberty with him, or even to treat him with the "hail fellow well met" of common familiarity. It may have been the innate distinction born of a long line of noble ancestry; it may have been the still higher dignity conferred by an honourable and single-minded character; but, whatever it was, nobody who came within the sphere of Laurence's influence could be unconscious of its presence, or could fail to perceive that, in some subtle and inde-

finable way, this man was made of finer material than his fellows. It did not make men love him any the better for it—rather, perhaps, it made the ordinary run of them love him somewhat the less: but it made them one and all respect, even if they feared him; and it caused all sordid thoughts and mean aspirations to shrivel up in his presence, as flowers in a frost.

Nancy had always been conscious of this characteristic in her lover, and now and then it had frightened her; frightened her with the thought that some day she should do something not in accordance with the strict and honourable code of Laurence Baxendale, and that then there would be found for her, in his merciless judgment, no place of repentance, even though she sought it prayerfully and with tears. She felt that Laurence's own truthfulness and consistency would only serve to make him all the harder in his condemnation of those who were neither true nor consistent; and that he would say, with the Apostle, that those who offended in one matter offended in all.

She had often said to herself that if ever she did what he considered wrong, she should never have the courage to confess the fault to him and beg for his forgiveness. No; she should have to deceive him as to her deficiencies as long as she could; and when deceit was no longer possible, she should have to go out of his life altogether; for the well-bred disdain, which he meted out to all whom he considered

unworthy of his respect, was more, Nancy felt, than she could bear.

She was by nature a woman of quick perceptions; and there is no such sharpener of natural perceptions as love; therefore her first sight of Laurence's face told her that he was in one of the moods when he was most terrible to, and unattainable by, his inferior fellow-creatures. She had meant to tell him about the loss of the keys; but the way in which he greeted her showed her that this was not the occasion for enlightening her lover as to any of her shortcomings; so she decided on this matter to hold her peace until a more opportune moment presented itself.

But although Nancy was a woman of quick, she was not a woman of deep, penetration. She saw that on the surface Laurence was severe in his strictures and stern in his judgments; and there she stopped. She did not go below the outer crust of the man and fathom the depths of tenderness hidden beneath the apparent coldness and *hauteur* of his demeanour. At present she had nothing to draw with, and the well was deep. In time it might be that her own love for him would teach her fully to comprehend his love for her; but Love is a slow—though a competent—schoolmaster, and his plan of education is by no means a rapid one: the cramming system is not his. And wherefore need he hurry, seeing that he is indeed immortal, and that his pupils will be through all eternity his pupils still?

But in the learning process men and women make sad and many mistakes: and Nancy was making one now in allowing Baxendale's chilly greeting of her —a chilliness arising solely from shyness which found it difficult for him to express deep feeling, and the sensitiveness which feared that any such expression should be misunderstood—to blind her eyes to the real anguish of the man's soul, and to deafen her ears to his silent cry for her help and sympathy in his hour of need.

So it came to pass that poor, foolish Nancy met Laurence with a half-jesting manner, which put him further from her than the coldest stiffness would have done, and added greatly to the weight of that burden which he already felt was almost greater than he could bear.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" she remarked airily, as if his appearance (which she had vainly looked for at the crossways) was a complete surprise. "Where are you going to, my pretty sir?"

"I'm going home," replied Laurence; and the misery in his eyes almost broke through Nancy's flippancy, but not quite.

"I haven't seen you for ages and ages—four hundred years at least, if not five. It is so long since you have been to Wayside that I concluded you'd forgotten where the place was situated; and I meant to send you a map with the spot marked specially on it in red ink, as if it were a station for a projected railway." If Laurence could be indifferent, so could

she, Nancy remarked to herself: as if indifference and the look in Laurence's eyes were on speaking terms with each other! But there is no one so blind as the woman who has made up her mind beforehand to see something else.

"I have been very busy, for one thing; and for another, I didn't feel much in the humour for paying calls." It was an inadequate speech, and Laurence knew and regretted it; but for the life of him he could not think of any less lame excuse.

Nancy tossed her head: "Oh! you needn't apologise to me for not coming, if you didn't want to come. There's nothing bores me so much as apologies. If people want to come and see you, they'll come and see you: and if they don't want, what's the use of telling fibs about it? It isn't one of the seven deadly sins, you know, not to yearn to call upon the Burtons every other afternoon: it's merely a matter of taste."

Laurence felt himself visibly freezing under this treatment of Nancy's: there is no barrier which so completely estranges man from man—and, still more, man from woman—as flippancy, whether real or assumed; it is a little matter which indeed separates very friends—and lovers even more effectually.

Therefore he did not reply, but looked at Nancy in dumb misery.

"I never quarrel with people for not coming to see me, any more than I quarrel with them for not writ-

ing to me," she went on in her most nonchalant style; "because a quarrel is no fun when there's some ground for it. It is when there is absolutely no excuse for it that a quarrel is pure joy. Just as there's no pleasure in saying nasty things that you really mean; the pleasure is in saying nasty things that you don't mean. I make a point of never saying sharp speeches to people who deserve them, because I find, if I do, the culprits are so pained by the accurate fit of the cap that they never rest till it is publicly removed. Don't you think that is so?"

"I don't know."

Nancy stamped her foot: "I wish you wouldn't always say 'I don't know' when I ask you things; it is a habit of yours which aggravates me almost to distraction. What do I care what you *know*, as long as there is something you can find to say? I'm not a Cambridge local examiner, or a bishop preparing you for ordination, that you need be so careful to treat me to nothing but accurate knowledge."

Again Laurence was silent. Was this heartless coquette the woman he had clasped in his arms just one week—a long eternity of one week—ago? And if so, which was the real Nancy? he wondered. Was this flippancy merely a cloak to hide her warmer and deeper feelings; or had she been playing with him all along? Perhaps he ought to have known her better than to suspect her of this latter insincerity; but when a man's heart is bleeding from the effects of Fortune's buffets and his neighbours' sneers, he

is not always capable of judging righteous judgment.

"You are very dull this afternoon," the girl continued, in defiance of the tugs at her heart-strings which every sound of Laurence's voice produced. The woman who can hear the sound of pain in her lover's voice unmoved has yet to be born; but the women who can hear that sound without showing that they are moved, are by name Legion. "And dulness is the one thing which my soul abhors," she added: "it is bad enough to say 'I don't know;' but it is ten times worse to say nothing at all; and you've been guilty of both enormities during the last five minutes. Think of commiting two unpardonable sins in less than five minutes! I am downright ashamed of you, Mr. Baxendale. Here is a nice rule-of-three sum for you to work out: if a man commits two unpardonable sins in five minutes, how many unpardonable sins will be commit in seventy years?"

Laurence raised his hat: his spirit was so sorely wounded that Nancy's cruelly careless touch upon the raw was more than he could bear just now. "I cannot help being dull, Nancy, but I can help inflicting that dulness upon other people; so I will wish you good afternoon."

And before the girl could reply, he had passed on.

Nancy was very angry; and she was all the more angry with Laurence because she knew that she herself was to blame. So she walked on, with her chin

in the air, repeating to herself the uncomfortable formula that if he was too proud to ask for her sympathy she was too proud to offer it. And as she so walked, whom should she meet but Lady Alicia returning from her daily constitutional.

"Oh! my dear Miss Burton," exclaimed her ladyship as soon as she was within earshot, "how glad I am to meet you! I have not seen you since our terrible catastrophe, and it is so necessary to have some one with whom one can talk one's troubles over; some other woman, I mean; there's no comfort in talking over one's sorrows with a man."

"No, there isn't, is there? Men either say that a trouble is no trouble at all, or else that it is incurable; just as if they see no medium between being able to walk twenty miles a day without turning a hair and being tied down to one's own back by a spine-specialist."

"Exactly, my dear child: what a sweet and charming way you have of putting things! It is when I am in trouble that I so sorely regret I never had a daughter; because if only I had had a daughter, I could have talked over all my troubles with her, and shown her how I have always been a martyr to other people's interests; and she would have sympathised with me, and blamed those who had brought so much sorrow and inconvenience upon me. I think it takes half the sting out of a trouble when you can lay the blame of it upon some one else, don't you?"

"Perhaps so; and it certainly adds to the sting of it when one realises that it is all one's own fault."

"Oh! I dare say it does; but as none of my troubles were my own fault, I have been spared that pang, and that has always been so nice for me. Laurence never seemed to understand how his poor dear father spoilt my life, and so he never blamed his father and sympathised with me as a dear sweet daughter would have done. Dear girl, how I should have loved her! And I am sure she would have been good-looking, because all my family are. No Moate could have borne the disgrace of having a plain daughter, because we had done nothing to deserve it: and it is so hard to bear troubles that you feel you do not deserve, isn't it, Miss Burton?"

"Horrid," agreed Nancy; "and even worse if you feel as you do. If a nasty thing happens to you which you don't deserve, you have an idea that some day it will be made up to you—like Job, don't you know? But if you deserve it, you feel you are only paying your own bills; and that is a most wearisome occupation."

"Yes, dear child; and now I want to talk to you about this sad, shocking, dreadful fire! Were you ever so surprised in your life as when you found dear Baxendale burned down—and so quickly, too?"

"It was an awful thing to happen," said Nancy sympathetically, "but I don't think one can be altogether surprised when one recollects how inflam-

mable all those old books and pictures and parchments must have been, and how violent the wind was that night."

"Yes, yes, of course; so very violent, as you say, and there is nothing that spreads a fire so quickly as wind. Just see what a pair of blow-bellows will do when you think the drawing-room fire has actually gone out, and that you will have to ring for a servant to re-light; and it always annoys servants so to have to re-light a fire in the middle of the day, though I'm sure I don't know why it should. But, as you say, dear child, the fire at Baxendale, though very sad and shocking, was what we might have expected." Lady Alicia appeared to be much pleased by this opinion of Nancy's.

"And I really cannot see why people should be in such a state of curiosity as to how it began," continued Nancy; "the merest accident—which in a newer house on a less windy day would have had no effect at all, and never would have been heard of or even known about—would be quite enough, in the circumstances, to account for the whole thing."

"Of course it would, my dear Miss Burton—or may I call you Nancy? It is so nice and friendly to call people you really like by their Christian names, don't you think?—how very wise and sensible you are! So much common sense is quite remarkable in such a young girl; perhaps the fact that your father is such a clever business man has something to do with it. As you say, the fire at Baxendale was not

at all to be wondered at, considering all the circumstances of the case; it was, in fact, quite the natural consequence."

"So do I think."

"Yes, my dear, and you are quite right. And would you not mind mentioning this view of yours to dear Laurence—just in casual conversation, you know, for I think so much real good is often done by casual conversation—as it may not have struck him quite in the same light? Common sense is not his forte, you see, my dear, any more than it was the forte of his dear father. But just a word from you to him upon the subject might do him a world of good." It is always more or less of a tragedy when the time comes for a mother to influence her own son through the medium of another woman's newer and stronger power, and especially when she does so openly. It is a public acknowledgment of the Queen Regent that the term of office is over, and that the Queen Regent has entered into her kingdom.

Nancy understood the situation and recognised the pathos of it. She was clear-sighted enough when not blinded by her own passions.

"I'll say it to him if you wish, Lady Alicia," she replied very gently; "and if he gives me the opportunity; but it is not always easy to speak to him about things that he doesn't want you to speak to him about, you know."

Laurence's mother sighed: "Ah, yes, dear Miss Burton—Nancy, I should say—how wise and far-

seeing you are, and what quick perceptions you have! I always think it is so nice for a young girl to have quick perceptions; it keeps her from making such a lot of social mistakes, even if she marries above her. But in a matter like this I think one should make a little effort, don't you know? Because it would be such a pity—such a sad, sad pity—if dear Laurence, through any morbid sensitiveness as to how the fire arose, were to have any scruples about accepting the insurance money."

The two women looked each other full in the face, and the same fear was in the eyes of both—namely, that the longed-for conflagration had been all in vain.

"It would be a great mistake, too," said Nancy slowly; "because it would suggest to outsiders that there was something queer about the fire after all: which, of course, there wasn't. It was the most natural thing in the world."

"Yes, yes—most natural, as anybody who gave five minutes' consideration to the matter could see for themselves. But Laurence is like his poor dear father, and is always longing for an occasion to sacrifice himself and all his family for the sake of some sentimental scruple."

"It is very noble and good of him," exclaimed Nancy loyally; "but I don't know that it is always wise."

"I'm not so sure about its being either noble or good. Of course, it is very beautiful and touching

for men who are monks and hermits and anchorites and sweet, weird things like that to sacrifice themselves for sentimental scruples, because they have only themselves to consider, and it will be so nice for them to have such a high place in heaven when they get there: but I think that men with mothers and wives and people of that kind ought not to consider only themselves and their heavenly crowns—they ought to have a little consideration for the women belonging to them: you see, poverty is much more inconvenient and sad for us than it is for men, because—if the worst comes to the worst—they can wear one dress suit for two or three years, and can take all their meals at the Club." For all her silliness, Lady Alicia knew what strings to pull when she gave her mind to the pulling of strings.

Nancy's mouth grew very firm, not to say hard: a woman is capable of being jealous of anything which a man puts before his love for her, even if it be an abstract principle. "I don't think, either, that a man is justified in purchasing a heavenly crown, and then sending the bill in to the women who have given up their lives to him," she said; "and yet that is what the masculine saints of the earth are very fond of doing. Doubtless they reap their reward: but it comes expensive on the women!"

"Indeed it does, my dear child. Not that I don't agree with Laurence that it is all very nice and sweet to be good and upright if one can, without inter-

fering with other people too much: but, like everything else, it can be carried too far."

"It is admirable for people to be good at their own expense," agreed Nancy: "but it is sometimes a little trying when they are good at yours. And especially when, although you have shared the cost with them, they never have the slightest intention of letting you share the crown."

Lady Alicia sighed again: "And it does seem to me such a pity—quite wrong, in fact—not to get all the good one can out of one's misfortunes. I remember dear Shakespeare once said something about adversity being like a frog, because there is always some good to be got out of everything if only one will look for it; and I do agree with him. If this sad affair of the fire can be turned into a blessing by everybody being made so much more happy and comfortable because of the insurance money, I do think it would be really wicked of Laurence not to avail himself of the silver lining which is hidden in the frog's head; don't you?"

"Not wicked, Lady Alicia; certainly not wicked: Mr. Baxendale couldn't do anything that was wicked, I am sure. But I think it would be very foolish and very misguided."

"So do I, dear child: and, after all, we are sent into this world to turn our sorrows to good account, aren't we?—so that it is flying in the face of Providence not to let everything work for our good, as far as we can. I mustn't keep you any longer now;

but I know you will say something nice and convincing to Laurence on the subject, just in casual conversation, won't you?"

And with that her ladyship pressed Nancy Burton's hand and went on her way to Poplar Farm; whilst Nancy walked on toward the Hall, her mind aflame with the desire to punish Laurence for treating what she considered a ridiculous scruple as of more importance than her future happiness. Yet only yesterday she had been possessed by an equally intense longing to fall at his feet and tell him that she worshipped him for setting his conception of honour and duty before every other earthly consideration!

All the way across the Park she looked in vain for her bunch of keys; and, as she had failed to find them there, she peered about the ruins with a wild hope that she might come across them among the *débris*. As she was continuing her search, a voice suddenly said:

"Pardon me, Miss Burton, but are you looking for anything? In the fall of this house, which was great, is there any treasure of yours lying buried?" And, looking up, Nancy found herself face to face with Rufus Webb.

"Oh, it is you, Mr. Webb? Good afternoon; yes, I *am* looking for something, namely, a bunch of keys which I lost some days ago."

Rufus put his hand in his pocket and drew out the missing bunch: "Are these they?"

"Yes, these are mine," cried Nancy, seizing them with a little shriek of thankfulness. "Where did you find them?"

"I picked them up just outside the front door here the afternoon the day of the fire: exactly eight hours before the judgment of God fell upon Baxendale Hall."

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE LANES.

"I could not love thee, dear, so very much
Loved I not honour more:"
An admirable percept this; but such
Make hearts of women sore.

Even as Lady Alicia and Miss Burton had foretold, so it turned out. Their worst fears were realised: Baxendale took no steps whatever to obtain the insurance money to which he was legally entitled. It was no hasty decision on his part. He had many a mental struggle before he came to the conclusion that he could not take the money. The temptation was indeed great. Could he only overcome his scruples—his absurd scruples, as the world would call them—how easy would life be for him! He would be enabled to place his mother in a position suited to her birth, and thus free himself from the constant irritation of her complaints against men in general and her late husband and her living son in particular. He would be able to repair the damage wrought by the fire to the Hall, and to live once again in his ancestral home. Best of all, he would have a sufficient, if a moderate, income, and could offer a home to the woman he loved—ah! how he

loved her!—he never knew how much until he had convinced himself that honour bade him give her up.

Yet, for all this, he felt that he *could* not take the money. He was a man who might possibly, in a fit of impulse, commit a great crime, but who would shrink from availing himself of any advantage, pecuniary or otherwise, which might result to himself. And that he had committed a great crime, the world in which he dwelt, as expressed by the majority of its voices, had no manner of doubt. With the verdict of society Laurence was fully acquainted. Naturally no one directly made such an accusation in his presence. The law of libel is specially constructed to meet such cases. Few men care to face an action for defamation of character: even if the unfortunate defendant wins his case—which is a rare occurrence—he is saddled with a lawyer's bill, which no so-called costs, even if wrung from the unsuccessful plaintiff, will satisfy. Wherefore Mr. Baxendale had no direct accusation to face. But he knew well enough the meaning of the shaking of heads, the suggestive glances, the innuendoes, the "we could, and if we would," which prevailed wherever men and women congregated. He had often professed the profoundest contempt for public opinion: he had looked down with scornful eyes on those men and women who play pitch-and-toss with the Ninth Commandment; yet now the iron entered into his soul, and all his philosophy was insufficient to enable him to be careless of public opinion. It

was sufficient, indeed, for outward show: he held up his head bravely enough, and even careful observers were unable to discover the pain he was too proud not to conceal. He knew in his heart of hearts that his best friends were right when they counselled him that the surest way of crushing malicious gossip was to take the money, and face the world with an unruffled brow. This indeed he would have done, but for a terrible doubt which he could not stifle.

It must not be supposed that Lady Alicia permitted her son to have his way in this matter without a struggle. Many a time and oft she combatted his pride, and strove manfully to overcome his scruples. It was all in vain; Laurence listened with exemplary patience to the maternal homilies, yet steadfastly declined to discuss the matter with her. He was very sorry—he would willingly do anything he could to give her the luxuries for which she pined—but duty was duty, and he could not oblige her in this matter.

But Lady Alicia's persistence was an additional trouble to Baxendale: her arguments that it was foretold that the Hall should a third time be destroyed, and that the person who set fire to it was one deserving of all credit as the instrument of an overruling Providence, hurt him more than he would admit.

As far as the world was concerned, he might just as well have taken the money. Those who had overtly or covertly insinuated that he had set fire to

the library for the sake of the insurance money now said that the insurance office declined to pay the money in so suspicious a case; and that Baxendale dare not prosecute his claim by legal proceedings, for fear of having to submit to cross-examination in the witness-box.

As a matter of fact, the insurance companies, as was only natural, had sent down one of their officials to inquire into the particulars of the fire, and had privately informed Baxendale that, strange and mysterious as were the circumstances, nothing had been discovered which would justify them in refusing to pay the money. This fact was pretty well known among his friends; but the pride which prevented him from claiming the money, likewise forbade his publishing this intimation upon the housetops. If he had done so, it would hardly have made a difference. There are some people so constituted that, when engaged in the fascinating occupation of gossiping away another's character, they are not so much unwilling as unable to pay heed to the clearest evidence.

Those who acquitted Baxendale were much exercised as to how the fire arose. As there is no smoke without fire, so it is unusual for there to be fire without hands to kindle the flame. Whose were the hands? To this very natural question there seemed to be no reasonable answer: and if Baxendale waited until a reasonable answer was forthcoming before claiming the money, it seemed

as if a considerable interval of patience was before him. This idea seemed to strike the unfortunate man himself; and after much self-communing he decided that it was only fair to let Nancy know the state of affairs. He could not marry her so long as there was a cloud of suspicion hanging over him, even if she were willing to share his modest income —with a mother-in-law thrown in! And as a dispersal of the said clouds was exceedingly problematical, there seemed no course but a termination of their hopes.

Having come to the conclusion, it only remained to carry it into effect. This was a hard task—far harder than the resigning of a handsome fortune. He was no coxcomb, but he was well aware that he had won Nancy's love—that her heart was completely his. How could he deliberately wound that dear heart? How could he steel himself to deal that fatal blow, when all the time his own heart was overflowing with love and tenderness? He thought he had sufficient stoicism to bear any pain himself: but it was another thing to inflict with his own hand misery and suffering upon the woman whom, despite that torturing doubt which he could not stifle, he still loved so dearly. Still, horrible as was the situation, it had to be faced: cruel as was the deed, it had to be done. Postponement, he felt, would make the task no lighter. So he set out to call at Wayside and bring matters to a climax.

As he walked along the lanes—those lanes filled with memories once so dear but now so bitter—he tried to find comfort in the thought that Nancy might possibly have fallen in with the current belief, and might regard him as guilty. That would make things easier; for she would be ready, nay, anxious, for an end to be put to their relation. He told himself that Nancy was always ready to fall in with the latest opinion: yet all the time he knew that he was doing her an injustice, and that no amount of gossip would ever shake her belief in him. Again the hideous doubt arose in his own mind. "If that is so," he muttered to himself, "she will know the truth about me." And then he bitterly rebuked himself as unworthy for admitting a doubt which he knew Nancy was incapable of entertaining in his case.

Then he wondered whether she would be at home —whether he would find her alone. He half hoped that he should discover the whole family assembled, in order to have a reasonable excuse for a postponement. Do not we all know what a relief it is when circumstances render impossible the thing which we would not and yet know we ought to do? Yet he had a feverish desire to get this thing done at any cost as soon as possible. This doubt was set at rest by his meeting Nancy herself a short distance from the gate leading into the fields at the back of Wayside.

Nancy's heart began to beat loudly when she saw her lover coming toward her; but she managed to assume a fine affectation of indifference.

"Is that really Mr. Baxendale?" she asked, with apparent surprise. "What *can* you be doing walking in the lanes on an afternoon? Are you sure that you are not a wraith, like Jamie in *Auld Robin Grey,* and that I oughtn't to be dreadfully frightened of you, and wear my hair *à la* the bristling porcupine in consequence? Everyone says you have determined to become a saintly hermit on account of your lordly disdain for the unworthy persons who inhabit these regions. I must say there seems some foundation for these rumours, for we haven't seen you at Wayside for a month of Sundays."

Nancy rattled on in this fashion in order to conceal her own agitation. At the sight of Baxendale she had jumped to the conclusion that her belief in her power over him was now about to be justified. He had tried to keep away from her and failed: now he was coming to tell her so, and to make it up. Wherefore it became absolutely necessary to postpone the making up as long as possible; and nothing was more calculated to effect this desirable result than an affectation of flippancy.

But Laurence, though as a rule he had not shown himself backward in playing the game, on this occasion proved to be unaccountably remiss. The old Laurence, with his stiffness and shyness, seemed as by magic restored.

"I am afraid you are right," he said; "I must have seemed sadly negligent of social duties."

"Don't be silly, Laurence," cried Nancy; "fancy talking of 'social duties'! What I want to know is, why haven't you been to see me? Do you call *me* a 'social duty'?"

"I haven't been to see you because it would have been painful to us both," said Baxendale, thinking that he had never seen Nancy look so pretty as she did now. "However, I was intending to call this afternoon. Indeed, I am now on my way."

"Mother will be very pleased to see you," replied Nancy, thinking that Laurence had never looked so stiff and unapproachable. "We had better go in at once. You will have some difficulty in making your peace, I can tell you."

"No; don't let us go in. I will call on Mrs. Burton another day. It is you I want to see."

"Thank you for the compliment," said Nancy, with a little curtsey. "After your behaviour lately you don't deserve it; still, I don't mind going for a walk with you, if you like. In what direction will you turn, 'gentle hermit of the dale'?"

"Let us go to Baxendale. I wish to speak to you about the fire."

Nancy assented silently, and they set off in the direction of the Hall. For some minutes neither of them spoke. Baxendale was too full of what he had to say: moreover, he dreaded beginning. Nancy, for her part, was not particularly pleased with Lau-

rence for his silence and his stiffness. He did not seem, she thought, in a particular hurry to begin the process of making it up. However, it was not her nature to keep silence for long; wherefore she soon began to speak.

"So people are right when they say you propose becoming a hermit, are they?" she asked. "I am sorry, because I don't like hermits: they are generally so dirty and disagreeable."

Laurence answered her question with another: "Do you believe everything that people say of me, Nancy?"

"It is only right for a properly brought-up young woman to believe what people say, isn't it?" she asked, with a swift glance from her blue eyes. She was rather frightened at the sight of Baxendale's face.

"I am not jesting," said Baxendale. "You must have heard the common talk, that I set fire to my own house in order to secure the insurance money."

"Yes, of course I have heard all that," remarked Nancy cheerfully.

Laurence's heart sank at the tone of her voice. He thought that she believed him guilty, and that she was glad so to think. He had only been hoping that she would think him guilty—but it was to be accompanied with a proper repulsion from one who could commit such a crime. Yet she seemed rather to be rejoicing at iniquity.

"So you believe this report?" he said at last, with a touch of resentment in his voice.

"Believe it? You silly boy! You don't suppose that I could ever think that you would do such a thing, do you? Why, you are far too proper a person to do anything so sensible! You would have scruples and conscientious objections and searchings of heart at the bare idea! Oh! no, Mr. Baxendale, I know you far too well for that!" And Nancy shook her head with the most profound conviction.

"Then you don't think I did it?" persisted Baxendale, with an eagerness he could not conceal.

"I know you did not do it," replied Nancy, emphatically.

"You *know* I did not do it?"

Nancy nodded with renewed emphasis.

"But how can you be so certain—unless, indeed, you know the real culprit? But that is impossible." Baxendale could not help the last sentence becoming a question instead of a statement.

"If you are so silly as not to be able to guess how I know, I am not going to tell you," replied Nancy.

For the second time that afternoon Laurence's heart sank. It was true, then, his horrible suspicion! No, he would not go so far as that: yet it looked as if it might be true.

"It does not matter a straw to me," went on Nancy, "what stupid people say. But isn't it lovely that the old curse is fulfilled at last? Now you will have a good income, and all your money troubles will

be over and—" Miss Burton stopped, as it seemed to her only reasonable that her lover should finish the sentence. But this expectation, like many other reasonable expectations, was not fulfilled.

"That is just what I want to speak to you about," began Laurence, and then he paused.

Nancy looked at him, but made no effort to help him on. To tell the truth, she was by no means satisfied by what she saw in his face. Love there was, and passion, too: but the passion was kept in restraint, nor was the love of the kind which casteth out fear. Something of this she saw; but she did not know what it cost him to refrain from clasping her in his arms and defying the world. Yet he did it; more than that, he spoke calmly, almost coldly.

"You know that I love you, don't you, Nancy?"

"I thought so once," replied the girl, piqued by his tone; "but you are behaving so queerly that I shall soon begin to have my doubts."

"What do you mean?"

"It is very evident what I mean. A month ago you not only professed to love me, but you seemed eager to see me as often as you possibly could, and appeared glad when you did see me. Ever since the fire you have avoided me as if I, instead of the Hall, had had scarlet fever; and now we have met, you behave as if I were a mad dog or a poor relation, so persistently do you keep me at a distance. A month ago you told me that in all your joys and in all your troubles you would come to me for sympathy.

Since the fire, every joy and every trouble has driven you at least five miles in an opposite direction."

Nancy was fast coming to the conclusion that her original idea as to Baxendale's intention was erroneous; as a natural consequence her temper was sorely tried.

"Why don't you answer?" she cried, with a stamp of her foot. "Have you lost your tongue, as they say to children?"

"I hesitate to speak," said Laurence gently, "because I know that what I have to say will pain me, and I fear it will also pain you."

"In that case the sooner you speak the better. When one visits the dentist's one doesn't care for much time to be spent in the dreary waiting-room furnished with *passée* magazines."

"Nancy, I hate to say it: yet I must—no other course is possible. I love you, my darling, I love you, and yet we must never see each other again."

"Never see each other again? How can you be so ridiculous, Laurence? This is really absurd! You say you love me, and I have told you that I love you. What is to prevent our seeing each other and being happy ever afterward, as they are in fairy tales?"

They were now in Baxendale Park, slowly walking toward the ruins. Laurence pointed to the Hall as he said: "The reason is there. The old curse has come true and the blow falls upon me. I cannot in honour marry you."

"It seems to me that it is quite the other way. You have won my love, and I should say you were bound in honour to marry me. As for the curse, it is really a blessing. You might have had scruples about marrying me before: but the fire has provided you with an adequate income."

"No, it has not," muttered Laurence gloomily.

"You seem to have exalted ideas as to adequacy. Anyway, the interest on a hundred thousand pounds is good enough for me; so don't be silly, there's a dear, and compel me to say that the fire at Baxendale has cooked my goose for me. You are a goose, you know—and mine—but I'll take you uncooked, if you don't mind."

"Nancy, cannot you understand that I am unable to claim the insurance money?"

"Most certainly I cannot. I never heard anything more ridiculous! What are insurance companies for except to make it worth people's while to die or marry or be burned to death? They made no difficulty about taking your money as long as there was no fire; and now that there has been a fire, it is your turn to take their money. I don't see why, as the Irishman said, the reciprocity should be all on one side."

"But people say it was no accident."

"What does it matter what people say, as long as they don't speak the truth? And that they hardly ever do, if they are women—which the majority of

people are in England, according to the last census, worse luck!"

"But how can I take this money when it is said that I set my own house on fire in order to get it?"

"But you didn't," replied Nancy; "and, as a matter of fact, your declining to take the money will be regarded as a proof that you did: just as conscientious scruples against supporting any nonconforming charity proves that people were brought up as thorough-paced Dissenters; and asking innocent questions about the habits of the middle class proves that the anxious enquirers were born and bred in Tottenham Court Road. Nobody apparently knows so little about a thing as those who really know too much."

"I can't do it, Nancy, I can't do it," cried Laurence. "Don't ask me to do it. It's hard enough as it is to do what I know to be right."

"I suppose you think it very fine to sacrifice your own interests for the good of the company. That is all very well. But you have no right to sacrifice me on the altar of your absurd scruples. I never set myself up as being an Iphigenia or a Japhtha's daughter up to date."

Baxendale made no reply. They were now standing close by the Hall, looking at the ravages made by the fire. For a few minutes neither of them spoke: then Baxendale felt a soft hand steal gently into his own.

"Laurence, darling," whispered Nancy, "you

don't mean what you say. Tell me, it is all a mistake. Just think of what it means to me. Oh! my love, why can't we be happy together, now that the obstacle to your poverty has been removed? Not that it was ever an obstacle to me: poverty always seems to me a nice, cheerful, picnicky sort of thing with a man one really likes. But you made a silly fuss about it while it was here, and you seem to make a still sillier fuss about it now that is has disappeared."

"Don't tempt me, sweetheart, don't tempt me."

"Surely you were in earnest when you told me you loved me better than anything on earth?"

"You know I meant it, Nancy. Oh! my darling, don't make it harder for me than it is. I love you better than life itself. But it is a question of honour. I cannot let you marry me so long as suspicion rests upon me. Nor can I take the money."

Nancy turned to her lover, with a look he had never before seen in her blue eyes—love and pride, offended dignity and spurned affection mingled there with a misery that cut him like a knife.

"Then you prefer your scruples to me? Having won my heart, you weigh it in the balance with your conscience, and find that the latter is by far the heavier and more valuable commodity of the two. Then you scribble *Mene tekel* all over my heart, and pitch it out of the window as being light weight. But you hug your own conscience in an ecstasy of appreciation, murmuring to yourself, 'What a good

"GOOD-BYE, MR. BAXENDALE."

boy am I!' As for what becomes of my rejected heart—whether some other man picks it up, or whether it is trampled to death in the dust—is a matter of no more moment to you than it is to the man in the moon. You have your own dear, large, honourable, superfine, extra-weight conscience in its place: and that is enough for you."

Laurence could only say: "You do not understand me now—some day you will."

"Then all is over between us?"

Laurence literally could not speak: he could only bow in silent misery.

Nancy drew herself up, and with a scornful "Good-bye, Mr. Baxendale," turned away.

Baxendale for a few seconds stood rooted to the spot. Then all his love rushed over him with overwhelming force, and he felt he could not let her go.

"Nancy!" he cried, as he started to follow her.

But she shook her head, and walked proudly on.

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. CANDY'S OPINION.

> Some actions, which could never have been meant,
> Are brought about by purest accident.

THUS it came to pass that Nancy Burton had to break off the thread of her life and begin all over again *minus* the principal element; a task the stupendous difficulty of which is not understood save by those who have tried it in person.

Laurence Baxendale had so completely permeated all her thoughts, words and works that it seemed well-nigh impossible to eliminate him from every hour of the day, and from every event of life, including the most trivial and the most sublime. The beauties of art and literature and nature owed half their *raison d'être,* in Nancy's philosophy, to the fact that she loved Laurence: the passing irritations of the trivial round and the common task lost half their sting in the consciousness that Laurence loved her. And now she had to face a world where there was no longer, as far as she was concerned, a Laurence to add glamour and intensity to her soul's most exalted moments, to relieve the weariness of its most uninteresting duties. The prospect of the dreary

path which lay before her was almost more than she could face with equanimity: yet it had to be borne, and borne with a brave front, as Nancy was the type of woman to whom pity was an insult. Her only comfort in the matter was that her engagement with Laurence had never been made public—had not been so much an actual engagement as an arrangement between their two selves that they would become engaged at some future time if fortune favored them: so that she had to suffer none of the unpleasantness attendant upon an openly broken-off engagement. This she felt she really could not have endured. Of course, all the world knew that Mr. Baxendale and Miss Burton had "walked out together" and "kept company," so to speak: but a laxity is allowed to mere company-keepers and walkers together which is not permitted to those whose betrothal has been advertised by letters of congratulation and a diamond ring. The former bond can be broken at the will of the parties concerned, for no better reason than that they are tired of it and want a change: at least, their world would be satisfied with this. But an actual jilting must be justified by a difference over the settlements, or the discovery of some disgraceful family secret, or else all the gossips of the neighbourhood will know the reason why.

Mrs. Burton was very good to her daughter just then. She showed her no open sympathy: she knew Nancy too well for that; but in a thousand little

ways, too trivial to be described, she comforted Nancy as only a mother can comfort.

Nora, too, was kind to her sister: but her own love-affair with Mr. Arbuthnot was just then proceeding along such smooth and pleasant lines that Nancy's sore heart was inclined to be restive under Nora's tenderest touch. And then Nora agreed with Nancy in blaming Laurence.

The only people who can really help us when we are in great trouble are those who have suffered more than we are suffering, and those who love us better than we love ourselves; and although Faith Fairfax could not lay claim to the latter qualification, as far as Nancy was concerned, she could to the former; and so Nancy found a certain consolation in Faith's society just then. She knew that Faith had loved Laurence and had loved him in vain; therefore she recognised that Faith's burden was a heavier one than hers; for, however desolate the rest of her existence was doomed to be, she had once lain in Laurence's arms and had felt his kisses on her face, and nothing could ever rob her of the bitter-sweetness of that memory.

The woman who has never been in love has no power to help the woman whose love is a sorrow to her; the woman who has found nothing but happiness in love, has even less; for they both of them live in a different atmosphere and move along a different plane from their less fortunate sister. The former talks a language foreign to her; the latter,

though acquainted with the same language, is read in a widely diverse lore; therefore she and they have but little in common. But Faith knew what it was to be in love—knew even what it was to be in love with Laurence Baxendale: and therefore Nancy called at Ways Hall far oftener than was absolutely necessary for the mere maintaining of neighbourly relations. Finally—most important of all—Faith did not agree with Nancy in the latter's condemnation of Laurence's refusal to accept the insurance money.

While we are as yet young and inexperienced (which comes to the same thing), when a woman confides in us her grievance against the man of her choice, our natural inclination—should we desire to please the woman—is to take her part against him and to tell her so. But as we grow older and learn better to know our world, we do nothing of the kind: we understand that to tell her that she is right and that he is wrong, and that we unanimously second all her votes of censure upon him, is to make her our enemy for life; while to put it plainly before her what a fool she is compared with him, and how utterly he is in the right and she is in the wrong with regard to the matter in dispute, is to earn her undying friendship. It may be taken as an axiom that a woman is never more bitter toward any one than towards those well-meaning but misguided persons who take her part against her lover. Therefore, the more Nancy worked herself up into a state of right-

eous indignation with Laurence for throwing away his happiness and her own for the sake of a (to her) absurd scruple, the more did she love Faith for defending the course he had elected to pursue, and the more (which really was unjust and unjustifiable) did she blame Lady Alicia and Nora for taking exactly the same view of the matter as she took herself.

"I can approve of people who sacrifice their lives for a principle," she said to Faith, when the two girls were discussing—as all Mershire was discussing—Laurence's action with reference to the insurance money, "but I really haven't patience with those who sacrifice everything for a mere scruple, such as Laurence Baxendale; have you?"

"Somehow he is different from other people; one cannot judge him by the same standards; and he seems to elevate a scruple into principle."

"But don't you think it is stupid of him to choose to go on being poor, when he might now be rich?" persisted Nancy.

"No, I can't say that I do. I think it is simply splendid of him to sacrifice everything, in the way he is doing, to what he considers right."

"But the world in general doesn't consider that it is right: it condemns him as absurdly Quixotic. Of course, I should admire his action as much as you do if it were actual wrong-doing that he was so firmly set against, and if he deliberately chose poverty rather than dishonour. But it isn't. He is sacri-

ficing himself and his mother for the sake of a sentimental scruple, which everybody except himself thinks is ridiculous as well as sentimental.

"That, I think, is where he is behaving so nobly. If all the world agreed with him that the only alternative to poverty was something wrong or dishonourable, he would have no choice in the matter: any man would prefer poverty to what other men condemned as dishonourable and despised accordingly: but to be poor rather than do what he himself considers dishonourable, although nobody else agrees with him that it is so, seems to me a splendid sort of thing, and just what any one who knows Laurence would expect of him." Faith certainly took a higher and more ideal view of the matter than did Nancy: but then Faith's life had not been included in Laurence's holocaust, and Nancy's had—which makes all the difference in an abstract discussion on sacrifice as a fine art.

"Let us look in and see Mrs. Candy," suggested Nancy, as the two girls had by that time reached the cottage where that worthy matron was, for the present, pitching her moving tent. She and her husband had incontinently fled from their holiday as soon as the news reached them of the catastrophe at Baxendale; and Laurence had felt himself bound to provide them with a cottage at once, and remove thereto all their Lares and Penates, which—fortunately having been upon the ground floor—were practically none the worse for the fire. A vacant

keeper's lodge at one of the Park gates exactly suited them; and there good Mrs. Candy took up her abode, and discussed with every passer-by the accident which had driven her and her husband out of their former home.

"Yes, dear," agreed Faith; "she is always delightful company." So the girls entered the little garden-gate, and found Mrs. Candy shelling peas in the porch.

"Well, it dew seem good of yew young ladies to come and see me," remarked the good woman when the customary greetings had been exchanged and her guests had found themselves fairly comfortable resting-places upon two upturned flower-pots; "for what with the fire and our holiday and the trains and all we've been threw i' the last fortnit, I've got such a lot to say that I don't know how to keep it in, I don't; and yet there's nobody to say it tu when Candy goes to his work; and it's sorry work it is to keep your words back when you are fairly burstin' with 'em."

"I know that feeling, Mrs. Candy," said Nancy. But Faith kept silence, because she did not know it.

"It du seem an upset to come back after such a pleasant holiday-time as me and Candy has just had, and to find no home to come tu," continued Mrs. Candy; "I haven't felt so upset as I did when Mr. Baxendale wrote with his own hand to tell us that the Hall was burned down, no, not since all the red currants fermented in the preserving-pot three sum-

"AND THEN ON THE TOP O' THEM EGG SANGWICHES COMES THE DOWNFALL O' BAXENDALE."

mers ago, and had to be given to the pigs instead o' makin' jelly for the gentry roundabouts. I *was* put out that time, and no mistake. 'Candy,' I says, 'I've treated the red currants this year the same as I've always treated them, and yet they niver before turned again me in this way: then what's the reason of it, I wants to know?' I says. 'Misses,' says he, 'there's some reason, yew may be sure o' that, or such a thing niver would have come to pass.' Oh! he's a wise man, is Candy—there ain't much i' the warld as puzzles him."

"I knew you'd be immensely surprised to hear of such a catastrophe," exclaimed Nancy; "as we all were," she added as an afterthought.

"I was, indeed, miss. When the letter came, we was havin' tea wi' my sister, who is housekeeper up at Cromer Hall; and—wud yew believe it?—there was sangwiches for tea made out o' hard-boiled eggs. 'Well,' says I, when I seed 'em, 'I thought as I'd been everywhere and seed everything,' I says, 'but sangwiches made out o' eggs is news to me.' And afore I'd done bein' astonished at the sangwiches, the letter came bringin' word as Baxendale Hall was burned down. Yew see, the postman knew we was havin' tea wi' my sister, and knowin' as a letter generally meant bad news, he thought it best to bring it on to us at onst. And then on the top of them egg-sangwiches comes the downfall o' Baxendale; and I feels how trew it is as wunners never cease."

"I am sure you grieve, as we all do, that such a blow should fall on your master," said Faith.

Mrs. Candy placed a hand on either knee, and looked Miss Fairfax full in the face. "Waal, miss, I wean't deceive yew; it wadn't be right and I wean't du it. When we'd read Mr. Baxendale's letter, Candy says to me, he says, 'Lizzie, this'll be a blow for the master, and no mistake.' But I shakes my head: 'Candy,' I says, 'there's good to be got out of everythin', as we can all learn from nettle-tea; and it's my opinion,' says I, 'that Providence has taken this opportewnity o' gettin' the better o' old Mr. Baxendale's will.' That's what I says."

Nancy looked up quickly: "And you were quite right, Mrs. Candy."

"So Candy said: 'Lizzie,' says he, ' I doubt but there's somethin' in what yew say.' 'I'll be bound there is,' says I; 'du yew suppose as folks are goin' to be allowed to make them foolish wills, like the present master's grandfather did, and that Providence ain't a-goin' to be even wi' them? Not they! And that is just what I should have expected o' Providence, seein' that the master's grandfather was such a fule (beggin' his pardon) that he bound the present Mr. Baxendale to pay goodness knows what every year to keep a lot o' rubbish from bein' burned, as any sensible man cud see wasn't worth the burnin'.' That's what I said and what I thought. And to my mind Providence has behaved very sensible in the matter, seein' that there'd be no peace and no

plenty for nobody as long as them rubbishy old books was above ground."

"You never did approve of the Baxendale library, I remember," said Faith, with a smile.

"No more I did, miss, and why should I, seein' that it cost such a lot to them as cud ill afford it, and brought no good to nobody? Yew see, miss, Candy don't hold wi' books, doesn't Candy; and it seems to me as if Providence was of Candy's opinion, seein' as how all that old rubbishy heap was burned up in a night, as yew may say. If Providence had had any patience wi' old Mr. Baxendale's nonsense, that there library had niver ha' been burned: yew may take my word for that," said Mrs. Candy, giving good reason for the hope that was in her.

Nancy nodded: "Yes, yes, Mrs. Candy; there's something in that. After all, if things ought not to happen they would not be allowed to happen." Her logic was consolatory if unsound.

"Yes, miss, that's what me and Candy thinks: and we can't hold wi' Mr. Laurence goin' agen Providence, as yew may say, in not takin' all that money as is his right and his dew, and which was Providence's making up to him for all that rubbish in his grandfather's will."

Faith drew herself up very haughtily: "Surely Mr. Baxendale has a right to take what he considers the honourable course without consulting the whole neighbourhood."

"Not he, miss: we can none of us du without

takin' the advice of our neighbours, and it's a wunnerful help sometimes hearin' what they say of us, though we mayn't enjoy it at the time. Now he's got a regular bee in his bonnet, Mr. Baxendale has: and the suner folks can teach him to take it out the better for him. He should just hear what Candy says of his behaviour; that wud open his eyes, that wud."

Nancy laughed ruefully: "I am afraid I agree with Candy."

"Yew see, miss, there's nothin' so troublesome as when folks get werritting about what's right and what's wrong. 'Let 'em do what's right,' Candy says, 'and think no more about it;' and he's a wunnerful knowledgeable man, is Candy. But always thinkin' about one's dewty, and dwellin' upon it, is more than anybody can stand: and that's the bad habit as Mr. Baxendale has got into, as his poor father did afore him."

"Yes; it is a pity, of course, to grow morbid upon the subject of one's duty," said Faith.

"So it be, miss, so it be; and when once yew get doubtin' about things, there's no more rest for nobody—neither for yewrself nor for them that lives wi' yew. I remember Miss Tryphosa Phillipson, as I lived with afore I was married. She was an old maid, and one o' the werritting sort. And when I lived wi' her she'd wake me up in the night and say, 'Lizzie, I doubt if the front door's locked: will yew just run down to make sure?' So off I had to go i'

the cold. Then no suner was I safe back in bed and dosin' off, than she'd begin agen: 'Lizzie, I don't remember if we douted the candles in the drawing-room: will yew just run down and make sure?' And off I had to go agen. And that's how folk get who are full of conscience and scruples and things o' that sort: a trouble to theirselves, and worse than a trouble to them as lives wi' them."

"Still a sense of duty is a fine thing, and so is a tender conscience. I had rather have a conscience that was too tender than one that was too tough."

"Maybe, Miss Fairfax, maybe; but Candy don't hold wi' folks as make a god o' their conscience, Candy don't. I remember onst Mr. Arbuthnot preached a sermon about a saint—I forgit his right name, but I know he were a saint—who spent all his life o' the top of a pillar, just for the sake o' his conscience; and Candy was that set agen him as niver was. He said, Candy did, that if folks was meant to live at the top o' pillars and posts they'd have been made to grow up 'em, like hops and kidney-beans; and he didn't hold with such Jack-and-the-Beanstalk ways, didn't Candy."

"Simon Stylites was the name of the saint," said Faith, with a smile.

"And Mr. Baxendale was made on the same last," added Nancy.

"So he was, Miss Burton, so he was; yew niver spoke a trewer word. But I make bold to say that there saint didn't stick his lady-mother on the top o'

the pillar alongside of him, because there wudn't ha' been room for her; and yet that's what Mr. Baxendale does with her leddyship, beggin' his pardon."

Again the proud look crept over Faith's aristocratic face: but Nancy said bitterly: "Yes, it's dull for women at the tops of pillars, Mrs. Candy."

"So it be, miss, so it be; and most perticlar for a leddy brought up as Leddy Alicia was. I remember her when she was livin' at the Hall, I du, in old Mr. Baxendale's time—Mr. Laurence's father, that is to say—and he worshipped the very ground she trod on, and thought nothin' too good for her, which it wasn't, considerin' what a pretty face she had in those days, and a figure like a willow wand."

"She must have been very handsome," Nancy exclaimed.

"She was, miss—a perfect picter; and a sight handsomer than all the old picters at the Hall, which Mr. Baxendale's grandfather set such store by. She was one o' the sort as seem made to be waited on, bless her!"

"She hasn't had much waiting on in late years, poor lady," said Faith, with a sigh.

"No more she has, miss; and it don't seem becomin', somehow. I shall niver forgit the first time I saw her come inta the kitchen at Poplar Farm to give an order herself, instead o' ringin' the bell for the footman to take it, as she used to du up at the Hall. I remember onst, when I was in service, to

give me such a turn as niver was when I see the kitchen-maid mix the mustard in one o' the room tea-cups: 'Yew must always use a kitchen tea-cup for mixing the mustard in, yew careless hussy,' I says: 'and niver let me see yew speak disrespectfully o' one of the room tea-cups agen.' And it give me just such another turn when I see her leddyship come inta the kitchen at Poplar Farm."

"Yes; life has been hard for Lady Alicia," Faith agreed.

"So it has, miss; and therefore I hold it is Mr. Laurence's bounden dewty to spend all that there insurance money in makin' his poor mother comfortable in her old age, instead o' sittin' all by himself up on top of a pillar, as yew may say. I don't deny as conscience is an invention o' Providence and shud be respected as such; but Candy says to me, 'Lizzie,' he says, 'the same Providence as invented Mr. Laurence's conscience invented the Fifth Commandment; and it ain't honourin' the Fifth Commandment to keep a leddy o' that quality in a farm-house, without so much as a single-handed footman to answer the bell.' That's what Candy said; and he's one to stick to what he's said, is Candy."

"I wonder how the house did catch fire, after all, and whether the mystery ever will be cleared up," said Faith dreamily.

"Well, miss, he's got his idea on that matter, has Candy, and so have I, beggin' your pardons."

Nancy looked up, her face alive with interest:

"Let us hear your explanation of the matter, Mrs. Candy," she begged.

Mrs. Candy, nothing loath, replied: "Well, miss, it ain't for poor folks like Candy and me to set our opinion above the gentry; but what we think we says, and what we says we sticks to. Now, I wean't deceive yew by sayin' as I believe Mr. Baxendale burned down his own house on purpose, as some folks say he did; but they aren't them as knows him."

"I should think not!" Faith exclaimed under her breath.

"But I think as he did it himself, all the same, though he's no more knowledge of it than the babe unborn."

"What *do* you mean?" asked Nancy.

"Well, miss, I think as Mr. Baxendale burned down the Hall hisself, but he did it by accident. First, nobody but hisself cud ha' done it when me and Candy was away, because nobody but hisself had the keys. He had tew sets of his own, and I give up our set to him before I went away; and all the folks say as the Hall was set afire from the inside o' the library. Then he's tew fond o' smokin,' is Mr. Laurence—sadly tew fond: why men shud make a chimbley o' their mouths is more than I can say; but Mr. Laurence is terrible fond o' doin' it, and many a time he's give me a fright for fear the sparks and matches shud get among them rubbishy old books. Why, he'd light his pipe up at the Hall, and throw

the match away, and laugh at me when I said it was enough to burn the house down over our heads. 'Yew needn't be afeared o' me, Mrs. Candy,' he'd say as peart as peart; 'if yew are as careful as me,' says he, 'the Hall won't be burned down again in our time.' As if any man—even Candy hisself—cud be as careful as a woman! But poor Mr. Laurence, bein' but a single man, didn't know no better."

Nancy's face was positively pale with excitement: "Then you really believe that that is the explanation of the fire, Mrs. Candy?"

"I du, miss; not a doubt on it. As soon as we heard on it, Candy says to me, 'Lizzie,' says he, 'mark my words; this comes o' the master bein' so fond o' smokin', and lightin' his pipe all over the place.' (He don't smoke hisself, Candy don't.) 'I make no doubt,' he says, 'as he's lighted his pipe onst too often in that rubbishy old library.' Yew see, miss, he'd throw the match away, as he was so fond o' doin', and go away, and lock up the house, and forgit all about it. And the match wud smoulder and smoulder till it got to them rubbishy old books; and then the whole place 'ud be in a blaze like one o'clock, and nobody cud put it out agen: perticulay as the wind happened to be so high that night, which made it burn all the quicker."

But Faith laughed this suggestion to scorn: "What an absurd idea, Mrs. Candy! As if Mr. Baxendale would be so careless as to burn down his own house."

"Yew aren't married, miss, beggin' your pardon, and so yew don't know how careless men can be—even the best o' them. Why, even Candy hisself 'll leave his boots dryin' at the fire till the toes is burned out, unless I happen to be handy to take 'em away as sune as they begin to smell. But he'd niver notice it, bless yew! not till the smell o' burned leather had got on your stomach till it was enough to bring the house down. That's a man all over!" And Mrs. Candy fairly bridled with pride at the extreme virility of her lord and master.

Faith was silent, and smiled the smile of the unconvinced.

"But what puts me out," the garrulous matron continued, "is that it was all my fault. If I'd ha' been content to stay at home and not got werritting over our grave and Sarah Maria's twins, Baxendale Hall wud niver have been burned. Candy wud ha' seen to that. Don't go tellin' me as the Hall wud ever ha' caught fire if Candy had been here to look after it, because it wudn't. But that comes o' carin' too much for this vile body, and for other folks' babies, which are made to be cut down like grass. Yew see, Candy niver fashed hisself about the grave nor the twins; and why shud he, seein' as they was neither o' them his flesh and blood?"

"But they were yours," suggested Faith; "and you and he are one."

Mrs. Candy shook her head decidedly: "Now, Miss Fairfax, when yew've got a husband o' your

own, don't yew go believin' no rubbish as to his relations bein' the same as yours, or t'other way round: because they ain't. Why, things as wud only make him have a merry laugh if his relations did 'em will fairly turn his stomach if they was done by yours. And it'll be the same wi' yew. I remember when my sister Carrie was a bit flirty, I thought it a rare bit o' fun; but when Candy's sister Jennie carried on wi' a young man, she fairly turned me sick, the forward hussy! I niver did get on wi' Jennie: her tongue was too sharp for my taste, and I never cud a-bear a sharp tongue."

"Then wasn't Carrie's tongue ever sharp?" asked Nancy slyly.

"Oh! Carrie was different. Her tongue was a bit sharp sometimes, I don't deny; now and then she'd be as peart as peart and have an answer for anybody. But somehow she didn't rile yew as Jennie did. When Carrie laughed at yew, she just set yew a-laughin' at yewrself; but when Jennie laughed at yew, oh, my!—she just made yew all agog to slap her. She was always a-gettin' the better of yew, Jennie was. I remember when my childern died and hers lived, she was that lordin' it over me as niver was; as if anybody wud want childern to live as had got noses like Jennie's childern! And such bad behaviour, too, just like their mother. No; I wean't deceive yew; there niver was anythin' genteel about Jennie, nor niver will be, no, not if she lives to be a hundred."

There was a moment's pause while Mrs. Candy's mind revelled in the memory of the unsatisfactory manners and profiles of her sister-in-law's offspring: then less soothing thoughts intervened, and she went on more seriously: "No, young ladies, I shall niver cease to blame myself for havin' been the cause o' the Hall bein' burned down. If I'd stopped at home, as Candy wanted to, it wud niver ha' come to pass. So let it be a lesson to yew—if ever yew get husbands o' your own—to du what they want yew, whether yew see the sense o' it or not. The Prayer Book tells us as we are to obey our husbands; and them as wrote the Prayer Book knew what they was talkin' about, unless I'm much mistaken. And if I'd ha' given heed to Candy's words, instead o' to my own sinful heart, coupled with the grave and Sarah Maria's twins, Baxendale Hall wud ha' been standin' on its own legs to this blessed day."

And Mrs. Candy looked round her with the dignified despair of one who has sinned greatly and has been greatly punished.

CHAPTER XVII.

VAIN OBLATIONS.

> To gods both false and true I'll humbly pray,
> If only they will give me my own way.

GREAT was the interest felt and expressed round Tetleigh when the vicar's engagement to Nora Burton was announced, which announcement occurred about three weeks after the burning of Baxendale, and for a time threw that catastrophe into the shade.

It is strange how the fact that a man loves a woman at once raises that woman in the estimation of her fellows. One might naturally suppose that women would reserve their admiration and affection for the woman who is unloved by man, and therefore has time to exhaust and gratitude to expend upon the less intoxicating brand of devotion supplied by the weaker vessels. But not they! As a rule women waste their affection upon the woman who has won a man's, and therefore does not thank them for it; and reserve but little for those lonelier sisters who, being shut out from the feast, gladly accept such crumbs as fall from the tables of the more blessed among women. Therefore her world spoke well just then of Nora, because she was so happy in the acknowledged love of Mr. Arbuthnot

as to be independent of and indifferent to its approval; and at the same time it turned a somewhat tepid shoulder toward Faith Fairfax, because for the second time a man, obviously foreordained for her, had slipped through her fingers and gone openly over to the Burtons' camp, leaving Faith in need of friendship and sympathy to supply in some measure the place of the deeper happiness which Fate had so sternly denied to her.

In a measure, too, this same world shook its head over Nancy's affairs. It was kinder to her than to Faith, because she had obviously turned the man's head, but apparently she had not secured his heart: and so—though superior to Faith in the esteem of a world which judges effort entirely by result, and endeavour entirely by success—she was distinctly inferior to Nora, and was treated accordingly. Faith was utterly unconscious of the judgment and condemnation which her world had passed upon her; and, had she known of it, would have been profoundly indifferent; but not so Nancy; she knew to a hair's breadth how much Nora now outweighed her in society's balance; and she raged in her heart against Laurence accordingly.

As a rule, sisters are alike in physical and mental attributes, and different in the deeper matters of character and disposition; which difference is not generally perceptible until they leave the garden paths which they have trodden together, and go out either into the Valley of Humiliation or on to the

Delectable Mountains—whichever the case may be —by falling in love. Up to now Nancy and Nora had been regarded as convertible terms: in fact, they had so regarded themselves; but at last they had come to the parting of the ways. Nora, who had hitherto been the spoiled and wayward one, was so softened and elevated by her lover's influence upon her that her character mellowed and sweetened day by day; but poor Nancy, who had always been regarded as the embodiment of easy-going good nature, was fighting such a battle and kicking so violently against the pricks that her scars could not help being more or less perceptible. She was very angry with Laurence for so persistently putting his own scruples before her happiness; and she was all the more angry in that she did not in the least understand the motives that guided him. That the very depth and purity of his love for her made it all the more impossible to him to gain her by any save the highest means, was simply incomprehensible to her: she had no idea that, had he idealised her less, it would have been easier for him to subordinate to some extent his conscience in the winning of her.

She was also angry with him for having so utterly transformed her character—for having taken away the light-hearted, irresponsible Nancy of old, and put this passionate, tempest-tossed creature in her place. Love, like genius, is not an integral part of character; it is a gift, an inspiration, direct from Heaven. Sometimes it is in harmony with the nat-

ural man or woman to whom it is sent; sometimes it is in direct opposition to each one of his or her inborn characteristics. Yet, none the less, is it of God, and so must in the end prevail.

One afternoon, not long after the announcement of her engagement, as Nora was starting for Evensong, Nancy joined her. "I'll walk with you as far as Tetleigh," the latter said; "there are so many things I want to talk to you about; but when a girl has a lover, her own family gets crowded out somehow."

"I don't want my own people to get crowded out, Nan; I think it is horrid of a girl not to find room in her heart for the old interests as well as the new ones."

"I want to have a talk with you about myself."

"All right; I'm listening," said Nora, who had learned that when a girl says she wants to talk about herself it means she wants to talk about her lover: "I am afraid you are worrying over Laurence Baxendale and his stupidity."

"I am, and that's a fact: he really is very trying."

"He is, Nancy." And the sisters sighed in sympathy.

"You are in luck to be properly engaged to a man without a conscience."

But this was more than Nora could stand. "Oh! Nancy, what a story! Michael has got a splendid conscience, and one in capital working order, too. Clergymen always have."

"Oh! yes, I know that. I didn't intend to say anything disrespectful about Michael—in fact, I meant it as a compliment. But you don't know what it is to be in love with a man who is everlastingly arranging a sort of spiritual steeplechase for his conscience, and making the jump so high that it bucks at every one."

"Yes, that must be tiresome."

"It is; most awfully tiresome. I've the greatest respect for the Ten Commandments and the Thirty-nine Articles and old-fashioned things like that, but I really can't get up any reverence for a lot of home-made commandments and amateur articles of faith and fancy-work of that kind; and it's no use pretending that I can."

"Poor old Nancy! And you really are in love with Laurence, are you?"

"Yes; that's the nuisance. If I wasn't, I should just laugh at him and his scruples, and think of something else. But I can't, though I've tried my hardest. However hard I try to forget him, he just gets into everything and flavours everything, like the taste of turnips in a snowy winter; and there is no getting away from him."

"I can't think why he doesn't quietly take the insurance money and marry on it and live happy ever after," said Nora.

"No more can anybody else: it is rank lunacy on his part."

"Still, I suppose a man has the right to sacrifice himself to his own conscience if he wants to."

"But he hasn't the right to sacrifice a woman as well: that's my point. If Laurence hadn't made me love him, he could have played Saint Simon Stylites to his heart's content. But a man has no right to sit alone on the top of a pillar all the week and on a stile with a young woman on his Sundays out. The two rôles aren't compatible. He can go in for the stile or the pillar—whichever he prefers; but he can't have both."

"I wonder if you really would be happy with Laurence Baxendale," said Nora thoughtfully.

"I don't know that: but I do know one thing—and that is that I shall always be miserable without him. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I wish he'd never made me love him. I used to be so happy in the old days when love was a game instead of a martyrdom."

"And games are much more in your line than martyrdoms."

"Of course they are. Now, some women—such as Faith, for instance—really relish a martyrdom and get the full flavour out of it. But it is as much thrown away upon me as is caviare on the general."

"I'm not sure that you would be happy if you were married," persisted Nora; "you might find it rather dull, you are so fond of change and variety and excitement. Mrs. Fairfax says that marriage is a luxury to a rich woman but a necessity to a poor one: it is certainly not a necessity to you; and I ex-

pect, if you were to marry Laurence, you'd say afterward that you would have had a jollier time if you had married somebody else."

"Pooh! that's nothing; it wouldn't mean I wasn't happy if I did say that. Did you ever in your life know a day's shooting, however good, that wouldn't have been better if the birds had done something, or the dogs had done something else? Men invariably tell you that after the most enormous bag. But it doesn't mean they haven't enjoyed themselves, bless you! It's part of the game."

"You can't deny that Laurence has been very wearing, Nancy; those conscientious, over-scrupulous men always are."

"Nevertheless," demurred Nancy, "a certain amount of conscience is a comfort—in a husband, I mean; not, of course, in oneself. I can't help feeling that in the medium stage—after a husband had ceased to be a treat and before he had begun to be a habit—it would be nice to regard him in the light of a religious service. It would make one feel so good and happy, like singing hymns on a Sunday evening."

"It does; it is a most lovely feeling, I can assure you."

"And you'll have it all your life: that's just your luck." And poor Nancy looked with envy at her more fortunate sister.

"Yet you used to be quite as lucky as me."

"I know: that is the funny part of it. I believe

that in falling in love with Laurence I resigned my good luck, and took the ill-luck of the Baxendales instead. They have been renowned as an unlucky family, you know, ever since the old witch pronounced the curse on Baxendale Hall."

"And you wish that you had never fallen in love with him, then?"

"Sometimes I do; and sometimes I feel glad that I have given up everything for him—even my good luck."

"I believe you were happier when you and Laurence were only friends and not lovers," said Nora.

"No, I wasn't. I dare say I should have been, if he had let me; but he was troublesome even then. He was always constrained and queer because he was so poor: as if there were a duty on friendship as there is on tobacco!"

"But how did his poverty interfere with his being friends?"

"Oh! I don't know. He was in love all the time, I suppose, and was afraid of it showing."

"And of course it showed in the end. Those overscrupulous people always do the thing that they have sacrificed themselves in avoiding; but not till it is too late to be of any use."

Nancy groaned: "That's Laurence all over: when we were friends he was always trying not to be lovers, and now we are lovers he is always trying not to be friends. He is wearing me to a thread. Oh! how I wish I could induce him to see the matter in a

sensible light, and let us both be happy on the income of the insurance money!"

"Here we are at the church turning; I suppose you are going on to Silverhampton."

"No, I'm not; I'm coming to church with you."

Nora opened her pretty blue eyes wide in astonishment. Nancy was not much of a church-goer, as a rule, except on Sundays. "Coming to church with me?"

"Yes. When I have set my heart on having anything, I leave no stone unturned in trying to get my own way," replied Nancy, with praiseworthy fixity of purpose though lamentable ignorance of theology. And the two sisters entered the church together.

When Evensong was over Nancy paid some calls in Tetleigh, while Nora and her lover walked back to Wayside together; and as they walked they talked of their love for each other.

"Isn't it difficult to believe," said Nora, "that you and I can ever leave off loving each other, even after we are dead?"

"Not difficult, my child, but impossible; for love carries in himself the proofs of his own immortality. None who have truly and deeply loved can doubt that their own are theirs forever; for there is something in the very essence of love which defies death and brings immortality to light."

"You mean that when we really love another person, we feel that our love is stronger than death?"

(It was noteworthy that, while Laurence Baxen-

dale devoted himself to the interpretation of Nancy, Nora spent her time in interpreting the thoughts of Michael Arbuthnot.)

"We know that it is, from its own internal evidence, quite apart from any divine revelation. Roughly speaking, I should say that those men and women who doubt their own immortality have never experienced deep and passionate devotion. They may refuse to accept the Christian doctrine of immortality—that is a different thing: but a human being who has once absorbingly loved another human being can never doubt that his love—and therefore himself—is immortal: he is conscious that it is too strong, and too Godlike an emotion ever to see death."

"I wish Nancy were as happy in her love as I am," said Nora, with a sigh.

"Poor little Nancy! I am afraid she has much to go through before she is perfected; and yet she is the sort of person that one feels is only suited to success and sunshine. It is difficult to think of Nancy as anything but Nancy Victrix."

"Yes: pity and Nancy don't dovetail into each other, somehow."

"No, they don't," agreed the vicar: "I can think of you as ill and sorrowful and yet yourself—your dear, sweet, lovable self; but Nancy, ill or unhappy, would not be Nancy at all."

"Come and walk round the wood," said Nora, when the lovers reached Wayside; so they crossed

the lawn and entered the little coppice on the further side of it.

"Hallo! what's that?" exclaimed Michael, espying a small, dark object under one of the trees.

"That's our idol. Haven't you seen it before, Michael?"

"No," replied the vicar, standing still in front of a little stone image; "what a quaint object! Where did it come from?"

"I don't know. It has been here ever since I can remember; and when we were children, Nancy and Tony and I used to burn sacrifices before it."

Michael laughed: "You little heathens! On what occasions did you offer up these vain oblations?"

"When we wanted anything. We used to think that the idol would help us to get our way if only we bribed him with burnt offerings. It was rather awful of us, wasn't it?"

"I don't know that you were worse than many scores of so-called religious people who treat God very much as you treated your graven image. But look here, what's this? Somebody has been offering up sacrifices lately." And the vicar turned over with his stick a little heap of ashes in front of the stone image.

"It must have been the boys," said Nora, with interest: "we'll ask them. Boys!" she called to her two small brothers who were just then in the middle of the road busily engaged in digging a short cut through the earth to Australia.

Arthur and Ambrose rushed up to the lovers: "Yes, what's up?" enquired Arthur as spokesman.

"Have you and Ambrose been offering up sacrifices here?" their sister asked.

The two children knelt upon the ground and examined the heap of ashes with interest. "No," replied Arthur; "somebody's been sacrificing here; but it wasn't us, was it, Amby?"

Ambrose shook his head: "We haven't offered up a sacrifice for a long time—not since the day at Baxendale Hall, when the big tree was blown down."

"Why did you do it then?" asked the vicar.

"Because we wanted to please the tree spirit," Arthur enlightened him: "we thought the tree spirit would be very angry at having his tree blown down; so we tried to put him into a good temper by offering up a sacrifice to him in the roots of the tree."

And did you succeed in pacifying him, I wonder?" continued Michael.

Both little heads shook violently: "No, we didn't; he was so angry that that very night he burned down Baxendale Hall. We knew he'd be in a wax, but we never thought he'd do anything as bad as that." And then the boys rushed back to continue their underland route.

"I wonder who did offer up the sacrifice?" mused Michael, absently stirring up the ashes with his stick.

Nora looked up with a solemn expression in her eyes: "I know: it was Nancy. I see now what she meant by saying that she never left a stone upturned when she wanted very badly to get her own way."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WEDDING BELLS.

You came: then undiscovered lands
Sprang straightway into view;
You took my life within your hands,
And all things were made new.

"So you, too, have taken to yourself idols, and made merry, and have forgetten the living God," said Rufus Webb to Michael Arbuthnot, one day when the vicar was calling upon his weird parishoner.

"No, Mr. Webb, I have done none of these things. I have merely believed God's statement that every good gift and every perfect gift is from Him, and have accepted such gifts accordingly."

"And do you think that He will permit His chosen servant and minister to put the love of women before the love of God?"

"He will not have to permit it, as far as I am concerned," replied Michael, with unruffled patience: "and there is one thing He knows as well as—nay, better than—I do; and that is that my love for a woman has taught me more than I ever learned before of His love for me. It is only by loving one another that we learn anything of God's love for us."

"Beware lest you are crying peace where there is no peace, and are imagining vain things."

"I have imagined plenty of vain things in my time, goodness knows! But this one thing does not happen to be vain, neither is it of my own imagining. I uphold that of all God's revelations of Himself to sinful man, there is none that teaches us so much about Him as our love for one another."

"How can our love for anything besides Himself be reckoned as other than idolatry?" asked Rufus.

"Because our love for each other is not separate from our love for Him, but is a part of it; just as the sparkle of a running brook does not detract from the glory of the sunshine, but rather adds to it, because they are really one and the same thing."

Rufus merely shook his head, and the vicar continued: "Besides, loving another person with a deep and sincere love gives us so much larger views of God's love for us. When we feel how tender is our own love—how we would rather die than cause the beloved one pain, and what we would sacrifice to ensure the loved one's happiness—all our petty doubts and questionings regarding God's dealings with us disappear. We know that we—faulty and imperfect as we are—are, nevertheless, incapable of leaving anything undone which would ensure the happiness of that one living creature: and is it conceivable that our love is a more perfect thing than God's love—that He created beings superior to Himself? Nay, we rather see that as we are each capa-

ble of caring for one other human being and only one, so *He* is capable of caring for the whole human race. Otherwise we should be greater than He; and the clay cannot be greater than the Potter who formed it."

"I fear you are comforting yourself with false doctrines."

But the vicar stood firm: "I think not. To my mind, the mediæval ascetics and the Puritans, who in turn taught that human love was an evil thing, did more than any other heretics in placing false barriers between man and God and in giving men incorrect ideas of Him."

"I cannot agree with you: I only wish I could. But how can you still go cherishing these delusive dreams when you see the ruin which overtook that young man, known to both of us, who had great possessions and loved them too well?" And Rufus pointed out of his window to where the ruins of Baxendale Hall gleamed red among the trees. "He loved houses and lands more than God—I loved my wife more than God—and it pleased God to take from each of us the desire of our eyes at a stroke. Then learn the wisdom from our afflictions and take care that a like thing does not happen unto you; for cursed is he that putteth his trust in man and taketh man for his defence, and his heart goeth from the Lord!"

"I think, Mr. Webb, you are unjust in saying that Baxendale loved his house and land inordi-

nately; personally, I never met a young man who, to my thinking, put so true a value upon worldly possessions. Like his father before him, he has one of the most refined natures I ever met with. The word *gentleman,* even in its most restricted and subtle sense, would always be descriptive of Laurence Baxendale; and that most perfect and exhaustive portrait of a gentleman, the Fifteenth Psalm, is entirely applicable to him."

"Yet the wrath of God came upon him, and burned down his house before his eyes."

"I admit that his house was burned down, Mr. Webb; but—speaking with all reverence—I do not see that the wrath of God had anything to do with it. I have no patience with people who put down to God's account the evils which most distinctly are wrought by man."

"Then do you deny that the burning of Baxendale was a judgment upon Laurence Baxendale—or, rather, a discipline necessary to the saving of his soul?" Rufus Webb's excitement, never much under control, was rapidly getting the better of him; he began to walk up and down the small room, thrusting his hands the while through his masses of unkempt hair.

"I do not believe it is anything of the kind," said the vicar, firmly; "though I hold that all afflictions, by whatever agency they may be wrought, will do good to our souls, if taken in a proper spirit. But I say that if any human being, whatever the motive

may have been, set fire to Baxendale Hall on purpose, that human being was guilty of actual sin, and ought to make confession of the same."

"No, no, no; not if Laurence Baxendale's soul is saved thereby."

"It costs more than the burning of Baxendale Hall to redeem his soul: we must let that alone forever. And we have no right to do evil that good may come."

"But it is not doing evil to burn the accursed thing: it is not doing evil to destroy false gods and to cut down their groves."

"It is doing evil to devote ourselves so exclusively to our brother's mote that we have no time for the extirpation of our own beams," said the vicar, rising to depart; for he knew that argument was worse than useless when Rufus was, as now, in one of his fanatical moods. "Good morning, Mr. Webb; come up and have a chat with me at the vicarage whenever you feel inclined."

And with that they parted.

Nora meanwhile was holding a very different sort of conversation upon her prospects with Mrs. Candy, whom she had elected to go and see while Michael was calling upon Rufus Webb.

"Good morning, Mrs. Candy," she began: "I hope you are very well."

"Thank yew, Miss Nora. I am as well as cud be expected, seein' as I had to get up extra early this morning."

"Why was that?"

"Because Candy's got a busy mornin' before him, killin' a sheep."

"Oh! can he kill a sheep? How clever of him!"

"Yes, miss, he can kill a sheep all right, Candy can; there isn't much that Candy can't du, but he doesn't get the pleasure out of it he does out o' killin' a pig, and it's no use pretendin' he du."

"Of course, there are degrees of pleasure in everything; no two treats are quite the same," said Nora, taking a seat upon a chair which her hostess had just dusted with her apron for that purpose.

"And so yew be a-goin' to be married afore Miss Nancy," said Mrs. Candy as soon as her visitor was seated: "well, to be sure, it du seem the wrong way about for the youngest to be married first; I niver cud abide it. I was always so glad as my sister Carrie was safely married when Candy came a-courtin' me, as I wudna ha' married afore her, her bein' sixteen months older than me, for anythin'; and yet, it wud ha' gone agen the grain wi' me to give Candy the pass-by."

"Well, I am very sorry, but I don't see how I can help it," said Nora penitently; "and, as you say, it is a mistake to give really nice men, such as Mr. Arbuthnot and Mr. Candy, for instance, the 'pass-by.' "

"It is, miss, and I wean't deceive yew; and her that 'will not when she may,' ten to one dies an old maid; or else has to put up wi' a widower wi' a family. I'm sure I don't know what I shud ha' done if

I'd let Candy slip threw my fingers; it wud ha' been the death o' me, I doubt! Even now I sometimes dreams as Candy is married to Polly Postern, and I'm still in service at Overstrand; and it gives me such a turn, yew can't think!"

"I'm sure it must!"

"Yes, miss, it be a fine thing for a wumman to have a man of her own to make up her mind for her, and keep her clear of fallals and the like. I don't hold wi' wummen keepin' single, I don't; they git all sorts o' notions i' their heads wi' no man to sweep away all the nonsense out o' them. There was my aunt Mehetabel, as niver was married, and she took it inta her head to be an invalid, if yew please: always enjoyin' some fresh complaint, as no sensible folks had ever heard so much as the name of, and drinkin' medicine by the gallon. Why, no husband wud ha' stood such rubbish, and quite right, tu."

"That is true, Mrs. Candy; men do keep us out of all sorts of silliness."

"Then, there was my aunt Hephezibah—she niver married, neither; but with her it didn't run to health-rubbish—it took her in a religious way, and she joined the chapel-folk."

"Well, there wasn't much harm in that," said Nora, with a laugh: "Satan might have found some worse mischief for her idle hands—or rather her idle heart—to do."

But Mrs. Candy looked serious, and shook her head: "He don't hold wi' chapel-folk, don't Candy;

he says as if Providence had meant folks to go to chapel instead o' to church, there'd ha' been a chapel instead of a church in every parish. And then, chapel-folk are always askin' for money; and what's the use o' payin' for a chapel, he says, when yew can get the church for nothin'? Oh! but he's a wunnerful clear way o' puttin' things, has Candy."

"You certainly seem to find him very convincing," said Nora, drily.

"Oh, he's a wunnerful clear head, Candy has. I often wish they'd got him up in Lunnon in the House o' Parliament, when I read a bit o' the papers and see what tu-and-agen work they make of it up there. He'd sune teach 'em what for, wud Candy."

"What side would he be on, Liberal or Conservative?"

"Oh! he wudna' take sides—he don't hold wi' takin' sides, Candy don't. He'd just put his foot down on all that tu-and-agen work, and he'd have his own way or nothin' at all. Eh! but he's a grand one for havin' his own way, is Candy; there's nothin' double-faced or reasonable about him—he don't hold wi' it."

"Then I don't expect he'd have consented to wait until your sister had been married first," suggested Nora.

"Not he, miss, not he," replied his better half with pride; "when Candy's onst set his mind upon a thing, yew might as well try to turn the way o' the wind as him. He ain't the shilly-shallying sort, as

will listen to reason—not he! So I was thankful as Carrie was safely wedded afore Candy came a-courtin' me."

"And whom did Carrie marry?"

"She married a man from our parts o' the name o' Parker. If when yew marry yew live all among yewr own people, it don't seem quite so bad, said she; so she took up wi' Parker."

"She doesn't appear to have been as much in love as you were, Mrs. Candy: for you came far enough from home when you married."

"She wasn't, miss, and I'm the last to deceive yew; but who cud ha' thought she wud be, seein' as it was only Parker as she was a-marrying? Parker was a decent man and a regular church-goer, wi' twenty-two shillings a week; but he wasn't Candy, and it's no use pretendin' as he was."

"Then you didn't mind coming such a long way from home?" Like all women who are truly in love, Nora was interested in the loves of all other women.

"Not wi' Candy, miss; I'd ha' gone to the very ends o' the earth wi' him. And yet, till I see him I'd niver been ten miles away from Overstrand; and I darena' ha' gone as far as Yarmouth—no, not if yew'd ha' crowned me."

"But Candy made all the difference. I understand that."

"I'll be bound yew du, Miss Nora, havin' been took that way yewrself. Eh, but it's wunnerful

how a man du make all the difference. After onst he's come across yewr way, nothin' iver looks the same agen, nor ever will. He seems to get inta everythin', as yew may say, and to turn it all topsy-turvy."

Nora laughed: "You are not very complimentary to the man to say he turns things topsy-turvy."

"Bless yew, miss, *yew* don't think as it's topsy-turvy; it seems to yew as if it was all topsy-turvy afore, and that he's just turned in the right way up."

"Like a dream seems topsy-turvy, and the awakening turns things the right way up," Nora suggested.

"That's just it, miss; and yew laugh at the dream when yew remember how contrairy it all was, and how right everything is now that yew are wide awake."

"Yes, Mrs. Candy, falling in love is just like that: the past is the dream, and this is the awakening."

"And it seems to me, miss, as dyin' will be like that, tu. It'll turn things topsy-turvy, I don't deny; but it'll be the right way up as it'll turn 'em, and we shall laugh when we remember the topsy-turvyness o' this warld, and wunner how we put up wi' it as contented as we did. I'm sure I wunner now how I cud bear myself afore I met Candy; it seems as if there cud ha' been nothin' to du and nothin' to think about: and I don't doubt as we shall feel like that when we wake up in heaven, miss, and see what bewtiful things Providence has provided for us up there."

"But don't you often think it is strange that we haven't been told more about the next world, and what it will be like?" said Nora.

"Oh! don't yew go worryin' yewrself about that," replied Mrs. Candy, soothingly; "it isn't done out o' disagreeableness, as yew may say, I feel sure. We aren't told more about it, because we cudn't understand it if we were. Why, miss, it's the same i' this warld. If I'd been told, when I was a little gell, what happiness was i' store for me in workin' hand and foot to make Candy comfortable, and bein' ready to lay down my very life at his feet if he wanted it, bless him! I sudna' ha' knowed what they was a-talkin' about. I thought that what I shud want when I was growed up wud be to have my own way and enjoy myself: instead o' which my happiness is in lettin' Candy have his own way and enjoy hisself. But it wud all ha' been Greek and Latin to me if they'd ha' told me that when I was a little gell and tew young and soft to understand it. And I hold that it's like that wi' the next warld, I du; we're tew young and soft to understand it yet, even if we was to be told; so where wud be the sense o' tellin' us?"

"Well, Mrs. Candy, I believe you are right; and now I must be going," said Nora, rising from her seat. "Good morning."

"Good morning tu yew, miss; and may yew be as happy in your marriage as I've been in mine—and I can't say nothin' stronger than that: the gentry theirselves cudna' ha' been happier than Candy and

I ha' been. I can't deny as sometimes I wish as the childern had lived: it wud ha' been pretty to hear 'em call Candy 'Daddy,' and to see 'em a-climbin' over his knees. But the Lord knows best what is good for us, so we must just submit ourselves to His hand. Maybe if they'd ha' lived, they might ha' come between me and Candy, and I cudna' ha' stood that."

"Thank you, Mrs. Candy, for all your good wishes: and if only I make as excellent a wife as you have done, I shall be quite content: and so will the vicar, or he ought to be."

"Bless yew, miss, who cud ha' helped bein' a good wife to such a husband as Candy—one in a hunderd, as I often tell him? And, when all's said and done, them as has husbands are happier than them as has none: it's dull work bein' an old maid, Miss Nora, say what yew will. It's every wumman's right to have a man of her own; and them as has missed that has missed the best i' this warld. Why, if yew've got a man o' your own, there's always somebody to be sorry when yew are sick, and pleased when yew are about and busy; and there's always somebody to listen to what yew say, and to show yew what a fule yew was for sayin' it; and there's always somebody to find fault wi' all your little fads, and yet to like yew all the better for 'em. Mark my words, Miss Nora, there's no love in the warld like the love o' the man who loves yew as his own flesh: and them as pretends that there is, talks old maid's nonsense."

"They do, Mrs. Candy. I haven't patience with people who try to make out that parents and brothers and sisters can ever make up to a woman for not having known what the love of a husband means."

"Well, it don't, whativer them old maids chewse to say. Why, Miss Nora, when my first baby come, and I'd got the baby *and* Candy, I felt as no leddy in the land cud be happier than me, because, you see, there cudn't be anythin' better in the whole warld than a husband like Candy and a little baby as well. In fact, it was tu much happiness for this sinful warld, so the good Lord took the baby, and is savin' her up for me when I gets to heaven. Yes, miss, I sees it all now, as plain as plain: Candy and the childern was tu much happiness for this life, so the Lord is savin' up the childern for the next, just as we don't let our childern have all their cakes and toys on one day, but we put some by till to-morrow."

And then Nora completed her farewells, and went out into the lanes, where she found her lover awaiting her.

Early in October Michael Arbuthnot took Nora Burton as his wedded wife: and great were the rejoicings in Tetleigh accordingly. The bridesmaids wore soft blue dresses, the colour of Nancy's eyes; and no one, to see her, could have guessed how heavy with crushed tears were those apparently laughing orbs. Nancy really played her part very well just then: and it was by no means an easy part to play. To a proud woman the knowledge that her

world regards her with pity, is about as unpleasant a branch of instruction as she will ever have to master, and Nancy was fully cognisant of that particular fact just then. Though people in general did not know exactly what had happened, they were aware that Laurence and Nancy had once walked and talked together, and now they walked and talked together no longer; and they drew their own conclusions accordingly; which conclusions, it must be admitted, were not altogether wide of the mark. As a rule, the public blamed Laurence as a fool for not taking the insurance money and marrying upon it; for the fact that—owing to malicious reports—he had declined to accept the compensation to which his loss entitled him had become public property by this time. Nancy was quite aware of this; there was not much that that young lady was not quite aware of; but it is not a source of any solid comfort to a woman to know that her world condemns as a fool the man to whom she has given her life's devotion.

And yet, do what she would, she could not rid herself of her overmastering love for Laurence Baxendale. She did not clutch her misery and make much of it, as a more sentimental girl would have done; on the contrary, she hated it so much that she would have escaped from it at any price. It was no pleasure to Nancy to be unhappy, as it is to so many women: success was her rôle in life, and she sorely resented having to play a part so sadly out of

character with her preconceived notions of herself. Nevertheless, go where she would and do what she could, she was all the while conscious of an underlying homesickness for Laurence, which time did not cure nor diversion allay. "I want him so! I want him so!" she kept saying to herself: and nothing else in any way appeased that consuming need.

Yet Nancy Burton was a girl whom other girls condemned as heartless and shallow, and whom the world in general envied rather than pitied, and laughed with rather than cried over. So penetrating and foreseeing, as a rule, is the judgment of a woman's world, and especially of her female friends!

But she bore herself with a brave front, and no one noticed that she was gradually growing thinner and paler. Laurence would have noticed it fast enough if he had seen her: he had tried to crush his love, but he was not yet as blind as all that: but he went with Lady Alicia to stay at his uncle's soon after the burning of Baxendale, and did not return until the middle of the winter. He had been so sorely wounded by the gossip about himself and the cause of the fire that for a time life in the neighbourhood of Baxendale was insupportable to his proud and sensitive spirit. And Mr. and Mrs. Burton were so full of their second daughter's affairs, and the new life upon which she was entering, that they did not give much attention to their elder for awhile.

So Nancy faded away day by day: and no one noticed, no one knew.

One afternoon, not long after Nora's marriage, Mrs. Fairfax and her daughter were sitting in their entrance-hall, as was their custom when the weather closed the verandah to them for a time. And an ideal hall it was, with its carved oak chimney-corner, and its archways hung with costly curtains, and its walls lined with the portraits of dead and gone Fairfaxes. At no season of the year was Ways Hall without flowers—flowers in the rooms and in the hall and on the staircase and in every available space. Certainly in this case, when Mahomet could not go to the mountain, the mountain came to Mahomet; when Mrs. Fairfax could not go to her garden, her garden came to her: so that it was always spring inside Ways Hall, whatever ridiculous tricks the weather might be playing outside. Mrs. Fairfax had grasped the truth, which so few gardeners seem able to master, that a greenhouse is a means and not an end. In the autumn and winter the flowers were born and bred in her numerous hot-houses: but that was merely for educational purposes: as soon as they reached perfection they were brought at once into the Hall, and there made happier, by their beauty and freshness, the lives of Mrs. Fairfax and Faith. And by always living with flowers, these two women imbibed some of the nature of the flowers by which they were constantly surrounded: the brightness and freshness of the plants entered into the human being, and made them thereby better and truer women for time and for eternity.

"My dear," Mrs. Fairfax remarked, after a few minutes' silence *à propos* of nothing but her own meditations, "Laurence Baxendale is a fool."

"Oh, mother, what a thing to say!"

"It's the truth, and the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Laurence and his father were always fools: nice, well-mannered, lovable fools, I will admit; but still fools of the finest water: the sort of fools whose folly is always getting between their own feet and tripping them up."

Faith sighed: "Yes, I think poor Laurence's mistakes always tell against himself more than against any one."

"So did his father's. Some people's omissions are always on the debtor side of the account, and never on the creditor side: they forget what they owe to other people, but never what other people owe to them. But the Baxendales are the very opposite of that: their blunders invariably tell against themselves."

"And their undertakings always seem to turn out badly somehow."

"Yes; the gift of success was withheld when the fairies presided at the Baxendale christenings. As a rule, there are two means by which a man may attain success—his own competence or the incompetence of his fellows; but neither of these means has been of any use to the Baxendale men."

"And yet they are splendid men in their way."

Mrs. Fairfax shrugged her still shapely shoul-

ders: "Humph, I suppose they are cast in a somewhat heroic mould; but they are the sort of men who always put their money on the wrong horse, and identify themselves with the losing cause. In the time of the Reformation, the Baxendales were Romanists; in the time of the Commonwealth, they were Royalists; in the days of the Georges, they were Jacobites; and I feel sure that in mediæval times they were often nearly converted to Hebraism by the frequent persecutions of the Jews."

"But all that merely goes to prove their glorious courage and loyalty." Faith—like all very amiable people—had a strong strain of obstinacy in her composition.

"I think it often goes to prove their stupidity. Baxendale Hall, like Oxford, has always been the home of lost causes and impossible beliefs; and personally I'd rather live in the homes of governing majorities and established churches; it is more comfortable and less draughty."

"But men must have their ideals, mother."

"And servants must have their beer: but there is such a thing as beer-money, my dear child, which does instead, and is often both more convenient and more profitable to all parties concerned."

"And then the Baxendales are all so truthful and honourable," persisted Faith.

"Far too much so: they tell you truths that you'd rather not hear. Personally I hate people who always tell you the truth. Who wants to hear the

truth? I'm sure I don't; it is always so humbling, and humility is the most depressing virtue out; though all virtues are more or less lowering, unless taken in very small quantities."

Faith smiled: "Dear mother, what things you say!"

"Well, I mean them—at least I do now and then. But the Baxendale trick of truth-telling really does depress me, and makes the perpetrators of it so unpopular, too. If you want people to be in love with you, you must begin by making them in love with themselves; and then the desired result will soon follow. But few people have learned this elementary truth—least of all the Baxendales."

"Well, still there *are* people who love even the Baxendales."

"My dear, there *are* people who eat coal and slate-pencil and enjoy them: I never legislate for exceptions. But I own I sometimes wonder if little Nancy Burton is one of the exceptions who love Laurence Baxendale."

Faith shook her head: "She may, and does, I think, like him; but it isn't in her to love anybody. Nancy is a dear girl, full of life and high spirits, and is a most delightful companion: I always feel that a sight of her is like a breath of mountain air on a stuffy day: but hers is not a nature capable of deep affection."

(Yet Faith had got over her love for Laurence Baxendale, and Nancy was slowly dying of it! So

do the saints of the earth sit in judgment upon their more human sisters.)

"Well, I hope you are right, for any woman who loves Laurence will find life a perpetual Lent, both as regards doctrines and dinners. Trust a Baxendale for finding out an altar on which to sacrifice himself and everybody belonging to him: all the Baxendales have keen noses for a sacrifice. And then, as I said before, I can't stand their way of putting one out of love with oneself." And the ex-beauty tossed her head in disgust.

Faith was amused: "Poor Laurence seems to have annoyed you."

"Certain plain speaking I am accustomed to and can stand. For instance, no man ever went to another man's house without saying that the shrubs wanted thinning, and that there was too much window room: everybody is prepared for plain speaking of that kind, and nobody resents it. But what I can't stand is when people show up all your little ignorances. What does it matter whether a woman is ignorant or not, as long as she has been good looking and is still well dressed? Yet Laurence once quite corrected me for not knowing the difference between Addison and Pope. As if there really was any difference that mattered!"

"It is a pity that Laurence has so taken to heart the absurd gossip about his burning down his own house: for it was very absurd," said Faith thoughtfully.

"I should think it was, and showed an utter absence of knowledge of the merits of the case. As if any Baxandale would ever do anything, either wrong or right, that in any way redounded to his own advantage! It isn't in the blood."

"I wouldn't breathe a word to any one but you, mother; but I always suspect poor old Rufus Webb of having set fire to the Hall in a fit of religious frenzy: though how he managed to do it from the upper storey I can never conceive. He would imagine that by doing so he was saving Laurence's soul."

"I know you think so, my dear; but I don't think anything of the kind. I have my own ideas as to how Baxendale Hall was fired."

Faith looked surprised: "Who ever do you suspect, mother, dear?"

"For goodness' sake, don't go repeating what I say, and sending your mother to prison for libel: but my impression is that no one did it on purpose."

"Then do you agree with Mrs. Candy that Laurence himself did it by accident?"

"No, my dear: but I think that those tiresome little Burton boys did." Mrs. Fairfax could never quite forgive any other woman for having borne sons while she herself had only had a daughter.

"Oh, mother! How could Arthur and Ambrose have set fire to Baxendale Hall?"

"Mischievous boys will find a way of doing anything that is troublesome and naughty. I don't know how they did it; but they did do it, I have no

doubt, with their nasty bonfires and sacrifices and things. I found them offering up a sacrifice one day in the lanes, and it at once struck me how Baxendale had been burned."

"But it is proved that the fire began from the inside, and the boys couldn't get into a locked-up house," said Faith.

"They could do so as well as that Webb man could, and you suspect him."

"It is only an instinctive sort of a suspicion: I cannot for the life of me see how he could do it—much less how those little boys could."

"They might have climbed through a window," suggested Mrs. Fairfax.

"But the windows were all shut and the shutters fastened."

"Then perhaps they stole the keys and let themselves in. My dear, I don't pretend to say how they did it: but that those boys did do it, I repeat I haven't the shadow of a doubt."

CHAPTER XIX.

WINTER DAYS.

The dying year is covered o'er with leaves,
And weeping Nature for her children grieves.

THE vicar and their bride went to Italy for their honeymoon, and did not come back until the beginning of December. On their return they found that winter had begun earlier than usual and also with unwonted severity even for England; and that it was finding out all the delicate people and numbering them with an accuracy which would have put the strictest census-paper to shame.

By this time Mr. and Mrs. Burton had discovered that all was not well with their elder daughter, in spite of the apparently high spirits she so persistently maintained; the same depressing conviction had also been borne in upon Anthony, and the trio were deeply concerned thereat. Not only was Nancy thinner and paler than she was at the time of Nora's wedding, but the cold weather had endowed her with a hacking little cough which went through the hearts of those that loved her. Nora and her husband were shocked to see the change that two short (to them extraordinarily short) months had wrought in the once radiant Nancy: and Mrs. Arbuthnot sec-

onded her parents' fears that there was something very wrong indeed with her sister. Nancy carried her head as high as ever, and was as independent as of old of sympathy or pity: but the vulpine gnawing must tell in the long run, however great be the fortitude of the Spartan boy or his equivalent; and it was getting near to the end of the run, as far as Nancy's particular fox was concerned. She had staked her all on one cast of the dice, and had lost: bereft of the one love of her life, she was indeed bereft. She simply could not live without Laurence Baxendale; that was the long and the short of it.

Some women are made after this pattern. They not only put all their eggs into one basket—a most unscientific mode of packing: they also find it impossible to sustain life without an adequate supply of eggs, eggs being absolutely indispensable to their existence; hence, when the one basket breaks down, as those single baskets are so prone to do, there is nothing left to keep the starving creatures alive. Heaven help such poor fond souls, for earth is apt to be too hard for them!

It is but fair to add that Laurence himself had no idea how hardly things were going with Nancy. If he had guessed that she was slowly dying for want of him, nothing could have kept him away from her; for underneath his somewhat strained scrupulousness the man was a true man, and his love for Nancy was of the finest quality. But he was so little of a coxcomb that the notion that a woman could die for

love of him never once entered into his head; and he would have scorned it as an absurdity had any one suggested it to him.

There was another reason why he dared not yet return to Poplar Farm; and that was his undying love for the said Nancy and his fear that if he were brought face to face with her again all his scruples would avail him nothing, and he should once more take her into his heart, and swear that he would never let her go. And this he had definitely decided not to do: for, let other people say what they would, Laurence was fully persuaded in his own mind that Baxendale Hall had been set on fire by one of two persons—either by his mother or by Nancy. These were the only two (except himself) who had any motive for doing this thing: these were the only two (as far as he knew) who had access to the keys of the front door and the library, and the house had evidently been fired from the inside and from the upper storey: and these were the only two who had ever suggested that he himself might commit the crime.

And this conclusion formed in his eyes an insurmountable barrier between himself and Nancy. If Lady Alicia were guilty, then his mother's shame was his, and he had no right to ask any other woman to share his dishonour: if, on the contrary, Nancy were guilty, then he was ready to lay down his life to shield her good name: but he was not altogether prepared to exchange it for his own. Baxendale

had not as yet gauged the overwhelming force of human love in general, and of his own in particular: but he had gauged it sufficiently not to want to be brought into contact with Miss Burton just then. So he kept out of temptation's way.

There is no doubt that he was sorely to be pitied. To feel certain that either one's mother or the woman whom one loves has been guilty of a dishonourable act—of a crime, in fact, in the eyes of the law—is not a conviction belonging to the peace of any man's soul, even of the most callous and unscrupulous: and Laurence Baxendale was neither unscrupulous nor callous: so that the bitterness of this conviction was to him as the very bitterness of death.

When the vicar and his wife were sitting at breakfast one morning, not long after their return to Tetleigh, the maid brought in the card of Dr. Arrowsmith, one of the Silverhampton doctors.

"What on earth can he want?" said Michael, looking at the card.

"Let's have him in and ask him," Nora suggested; "it will be the simplest way of finding out; just as opening one's letters is so much simpler than trying to guess from the postmark who they come from—yet nearly everybody tries the latter method first."

"Shall we have him in here?" asked the vicar, doubtfully.

"Of course. I want to hear what he has got to say."

"But, dearest, the breakfast is all about."

"That doesn't matter. He must know that even clergymen eat sometimes—especially as he is a doctor."

"Still, darling, he may not wish you to hear what he has got to say."

"Oh, Michael, what a fussy old maid you are! I can't think what induced me to marry an old maid."

"Possibly because the old maid happened to fall in love with you," suggested the vicar.

"That must have been it. Nobody but old maids ever did fall in love with us, worse luck! Laurence Baxendale is an older maid than you are—a younger man, I know, but an older maid—he fell in love with Nancy; and I can't keep count of how many others have done it besides. It seems an old maidish trick that they fall into."

"But what about Dr. Arrowsmith, Nora?" said the vicar, again looking at the card.

"I've told you—go and bring him in here: if you don't, I shall have to fetch him myself."

Michael did as he was bid, kissing his wife as he passed by her chair on his way to the door; though how his wife's chair came between him and the door, considering that his chair was just in front of that egress and his wife's at the other end of the room, it is difficult to understand. Still, it was only on a par with his having maintained, in former days, that the nearest way from the church to the vicarage at its gates was by Wayside, a mile and a quarter distant. Evidently Mr. Arbuthnot had not the bump of local-

ity. Many men, especially young ones, are similarly lacking; he was by no means peculiar.

As Nora had bidden him, her husband brought Dr. Arrowsmith at once into the dining-room.

"I am so sorry to trouble the vicar thus early in the morning, Mrs. Arbuthnot," began the latter, shaking hands with Nora; "but I am aware that a man called Rufus Webb is a parishioner of his—and a remarkable man, too."

"Yes," replied Nora, "he is quite a character: everybody knows him about here."

"I hope you do not bring bad news of him," added her husband.

"I do, Mr. Arbuthnot—the very worst, I fear, that I could bring. Webb has been knocked down and run over by a heavy dray; and is now dying in Silverhampton Hospital, where he was taken immediately after the accident."

Nora's pretty eyes filled with tears: "Oh, how sad!—how dreadfully sad! When did it happen?"

"Yesterday afternoon. At first we hoped that we should pull him through; but this morning it is quite evident that there is no hope of his recovery."

"How came a dray to run over him?" asked the vicar; "the streets of Silverhampton are not generally so crowded—especially in an afternoon—that there need be any danger in crossing them."

"He says he was so dizzy that he did not see the dray coming till it was upon him?"

"Dizzy! what made him dizzy? A big, strong

man like that ought not to have been feeling dizzy," said Nora; "was he ill, do you think?"

"No, Mrs. Arbuthnot, he wasn't ill; but I am afraid he was hungry." And the doctor's voice was a little husky.

"Hungry," cried Michael: "Rufus Webb hungry? I knew that he was poor, but I hadn't an idea that things were as bad with him as that."

"He was dying of hunger," said Dr. Arrowsmith.

The vicar's lip trembled: "Good heavens! and I never knew. What a blind fool I have been."

"He has evidently been starving for some weeks," continued the doctor, "and that is why he has no strength to rally from the accident. A man in better condition would soon have recovered from such injuries as Mr. Webb has received; but he is so sadly weakened by want of proper nourishment—I might say by want of any nourishment—that there is not the slightest chance of his recovery."

"Poor Mr. Webb! Poor, poor Mr. Webb!" exclaimed Nora, who was fairly crying by this time.

"He cannot live many hours: and as he particularly desires to see Mr. Arbuthnot, I came at once to fetch your husband. I gather that he has some sort of confession to make, as he keeps saying that he cannot die with an unconfessed sin upon his soul."

The same thought flashed simultaneously through the minds of Michael and his wife, as the same thought so often flashes simultaneously through the minds of two people who perfectly love and under-

stand each other: the thought that the mystery of the burning of Baxendale Hall was about to be solved, and that at last Laurence would feel himself free from any shadow of suspicion, and be at liberty to take the money and marry Nancy. And the thought filled them with joy; for the sight of Nancy's pinched face, upon which Time was already beginning to write lines which told a sad story of faith disappointed and hope deferred and love unsatisfied, was a sight which cut both the vicar and his wife to the heart.

But aloud they only said how grieved they were for Rufus Webb's misfortune; and the vicar made himself ready with all speed to accompany Dr. Arrowsmith to the hospital.

"It is as much as we shall do to get there before he dies," the doctor said.

"God grant that I may be in time to hear his confession," murmured the vicar.

And Nora from her heart echoed her husband's prayer.

CHAPTER XX.

TO WHAT PURPOSE?

> It surely would have been but common sense
> To sell this ointment for three hundred pence,
> And give to those who cannot food afford:
> Say, to what purpose was this waste, O Lord?

When the vicar of Tetleigh and Dr. Arrowsmith arrived at Silverhampton Hospital, Rufus Webb's sun had well-nigh gone down. But he knew Michael, and evinced a wish to speak to him alone; so the doctor went away, leaving the two together.

"I am so thankful you have come," the sick man gasped; "I was afraid you would not arrive in time: and I cannot die in peace until I have extracted a promise from you to do something for me after I am gone."

"I will do anything in my power for you, Webb," replied Michael.

Rufus drew a key from a ribbon which was tied round his neck: "This is the key of a tin box which you will find in my cottage at The Ways. Promise me faithfully that you will burn the contents of that box—that you will destroy them utterly, and let them be consumed by the fire that may be quenched,

lest the fire that never can be quenched shall consume my own soul also."

"I promise."

"Promise also that no one shall read the contents of that box save yourself—and, maybe, your wife, since those whom God hath joined together man may not put asunder."

"I promise," repeated the vicar.

"I meant to burn them myself, so that other men should not see my iniquity and glory in my shame: but the God of Vengeance has ordered it differently. For He has ordained that what is done in secret shall be proclaimed on the housetops, and that which is hidden shall be made manifest."

"I promise faithfully that I will burn whatever I find in that tin box, and that no one shall ever look upon its contents save my wife and I."

An expression of peace stole over Webb's white face: "I knew I could trust you," he murmured.

"Yes, you knew you could trust me, a mere sinful man such as yourself; but you could not trust the God whose minister I am. And why should you believe that the God you worship is inferior to His own priests?"

"I have served Him and feared Him with all my heart."

"That may be: but you have neither loved Him nor trusted Him, and by your unbelief you have crucified Him afresh."

The dying man lay silent for a few minutes with

closed eyes: then he opened them again and said: "I wonder if you are right, and if I have misjudged Him all these years."

"I am sure of it."

"And do you think He will pardon me that also, in addition to my many other sins—for I am beginning to hope that there is mercy reserved even for me?"

"I am sure of it," repeated the vicar; "although it is hard, even for Him, to be misjudged by those whom He loves; there are few things harder."

There was another pause, and then Rufus roused himself again and rambled on: "I have a sin on my conscience which I fain would confess. I have made idols to myself with my own hands and worshipped them. You will find them in the tin box."

"Have you nothing on your conscience also with regard to the burning of Baxendale Hall?" The vicar spoke very distinctly: he saw that the time was growing short, and he longed for Laurence to be cleared by Rufus before Rufus died.

"Yes, yes—that it is. I was so busy watching for Lettice to come and meet me that I forgot what I was saying. She always meets me when I come home in the evening, you know, but to-night she is late. And it is growing dark, too. Ah! there is her white dress among the poppies: and there are so many poppies this year, and they are so red—so red; red like crimson, and white as—as——"

"As wool:" the vicar finished the sentence:

"though your sins be red like crimson, they shall be made white as wool: you know that, Webb."

But Rufus was wandering: "Yes, the poppies are red—see how red they are—and Lettice's dress is quite white—white as her own sweet soul. And the flames of Baxendale Hall are red, too—like tongues of fire—look how red!"

Michael made another effort to recall the sick man's senses: "Listen, Webb; answer me one question: had you anything to do with the burning of Baxendale?"

The fading intelligence flickered up again: "Yes, I had: I saw that the young man's soul must be saved, though so as by fire; and I prayed God day and night that He would send down fire from heaven to consume Baxendale Hall. And the Lord who answered by fire, He was God."

"But did you do more than pray? For God's sake, tell me this, Webb; for the happiness of many depends upon your answer." The vicar was desperate: it was so hard to get a sensible reply out of Webb in his present condition, and it seemed cruel to press for one; yet if Webb died without making confession, how should he (Michael) ever face Nora and her sister again? Nancy's life depended upon the matter at issue, and Nancy's life must be saved if possible.

"Speak, Webb," the vicar urged: "did you do more than pray for the burning of Baxendale Hall?"

"Yes; but I could not enter the library, you see, where all Laurence Baxendale's idols were set up, as only he possessed the key." Webb was fully conscious now.

"Yes; go on; tell me all quickly."

"I prayed for an occasion, and yet none came."

"And you never had the chance of doing what you wished. Yes, I understand: get on—for Heaven's sake, get on," said Michael, putting to the sick man's lips a cordial which the doctor had left with him in case it was needed.

The cordial did its work well, and for a few moments the soul came back into Rufus Webb with a flash of its former fire: "And then the great, mighty wind came, and the Lord was not in the wind: and the earth shook and quaked withal, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And I stood before Baxendale Hall, and saw it as a reed shaken in the wind; and I prayed that the Lord would rase it even to the ground, so that the soul of Laurence Baxendale might be saved."

"Yes, yes; and what happened then?"

"My prayer was not answered: the great and strong wind passed by, and Baxendale Hall stood firm. The next day there was a great calm; and I stood before the Lord and prayed Him again that Baxendale should be destroyed for Laurence's sake: and as I prayed I looked down to the ground and beheld lying at my feet a bunch of keys—among

others the keys of the Hall and the library. And I said, 'God has delivered the Hall into my hand; I will go in and do with it even as I will'!"

Michael's heart beat fast, and he prayed that Webb's life might be spared until he had made a full confession. "And so you went into the house?" he prompted.

The dying man's eyes were bright with unnatural excitement: it was the last flicker before the light went out. "No; just as I was going to open the front door, I heard a Voice say in my ear: 'What doest thou here, Rufus?' And I answered, 'I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts; because Thy children have forsaken Thy covenant and torn down Thy altars, and have followed after false gods: but now I will destroy their idols, and cause their images to cease out of the land.' "

For a second Rufus struggled for breath, and Michael's heart stood still for fear that even now Webb would die before his full confession was made; but the unnatural exaltation still upheld him, and he went on again: "Then the Voice said unto me: 'Son of man, turn thee yet again: thinkest thou that the Lord seeth not, or that He hath forsaken the earth? To Him belongeth vengeance and recompense, and it is He that killeth and He that maketh alive. He alone can create and He alone can destroy: neither is there any that can deliver out of His hand.' And when the Voice had done speaking unto me, I turned me away from Baxendale

Hall; for I knew that I was not counted worthy to save the soul of Laurence Baxendale, nor to offer up his dwelling-place as a sacrifice to the Lord of hosts. It is only clean hands that can offer up burnt offerings, and mine were red with blood—the blood of my own wife."

"Good heavens, Webb! Do you mean to say that you did not set fire to that place after all?"

"Nay: the burning of Baxendale was not to mine honour; for the Lord delivered it into the hand of a woman."

"How could you tell it was a woman and not a man that burned down the Hall?" The vicar was now almost as much excited as Rufus Webb himself.

"Because the keys belonged to a woman—to a woman who had left the house just before I prepared to enter it, and who had done there as she listed, with none to hinder her or to make her afraid. And blessed among women shall she be—blessed shall she be above women in the tent! For to her it was given to save the soul of Laurence Baxendale, and to burn his images with fire, and to destroy the accursed things within his house."

Rufus fell back on his pillow exhausted, and Dr. Arrowsmith came and stood behind Arbuthnot. "It is nearly over now," he whispered.

Michael put his mouth close to the dying man's ear. "The name of the woman—for Heaven's sake, tell me the name of the woman," he entreated.

Webb's voice was so weak as to be scarcely audible: "The name—of—the woman—do you say? There is but one woman's name—in the whole world—and that is Lettice—my Lettice—my wife. See—there she is coming—to meet me—through the field of poppies—the red poppies. Don't you see her—in her—white dress—and the little curls—on her neck—and the dimple—in her cheek? I knew—she would come; she never keeps me waiting. Look, how the wind—is blowing—the little curls—across——"

But Rufus never finished the sentence on earth: Lettice herself heard the end of it.

"It is all over," said the doctor softly.

Michael stood as a man stunned: one thought and one only still possessed his mind and branded itself upon his very soul. "It must have been Lady Alicia," he kept saying over and over again to himself; "it must have been Lady Alicia."

On her husband's return from Silverhampton, Nora was bitterly disappointed to learn that not only had Rufus Webb not confessed to having burned down Baxendale Hall—he had also confessed to not having done so; therefore the mystery was as impenetrable as ever. The vicar did not tell her—or anybody else—Webb's story about the keys, and his conviction that it was a woman's hand that had actually done the deed. Michael now felt no doubt in his own mind that Lady Alicia was the culprit, since (so far as he knew) she was the only woman

who had access to the keys of Baxendale Hall: but the discovery of her guilt would make matters worse instead of better for Laurence. No honourable man would touch money obtained by his own mother's crime; and his misery would be increased ten-fold if that mother were publicly convicted of arson. So the vicar decided to lock up Webb's confession in his own breast, and never reveal it to anybody.

The following day he and his wife went together to Webb's cottage at The Ways, and found there the tin box, as Rufus had said. Save this one box there was hardly any furniture left in the house—Webb had parted with almost everything he possessed in order to buy bread.

"What do you think there is inside?" Nora whispered to her husband.

"Probably some relic of his dead wife: but we will open it and see."

So they unlocked it, wondering what pathetic little mysteries they should find therein.

To their surprise they found no love tokens; only heaps of manuscripts all in Webb's own handwriting; and—to their still greater amazement—they discovered that these were the manuscripts of unpublished novels.

At the top of the box was the following paper:

"It is my intention to burn these manuscripts before I die, so that my secret may perish with me and my sin be covered: but if God in His justice sees fit

to prevent this, I solemnly adjure whosoever opens this box utterly to destroy its contents, and to let not one escape. May God forgive me my sin in writing them!—but they were so burned into my brain that I felt I must write them in spite of myself—even though I knew I was denying the living God in so doing. I believe my brain would have burst had I not given expression to the ideas which consumed it: nevertheless, it would have been better for me to enter into life, having stamped out the intellect which separated me from my God, than with all my powers to be cast into hell, where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched. I hold that novel-writing and novel-reading are heinous sins; for whosoever loveth and maketh a lie shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone; and I would rather die for lack of bread than earn money by such a means as this. I will never endanger the souls of others by letting them read that which I, in my folly, have written: but maybe (I speak as a fool) the mere writing of it may be forgiven me, if the memorial of it perishes with me, and it be destroyed for evermore.

"(Signed) RUFUS WEBB."

Before burning them, Michael and his wife read Webb's manuscripts, as he had given them permission to do; and they were astonished at the brilliance of the novels. Admirable in elegance of style, mastery of delineation of character, powerful in por-

trayal of feeling, they bore the rare hall-mark of genius, and might have ranked—had they been published—among the greatest novels of the day.

When they had finished reading the books, the vicar said that he must burn them at once. Nora besought him not to do so. "It seems a sin," she said, "to burn books which might give pleasure to hundreds and thousands of people, and do them a lot of good, too, besides winning fame for the author."

But Michael was as adamant: "Can I break a promise made to a man who is dead?" he asked.

"But Michael, dear, it seems such an awful pity that all that genius should be utterly wasted."

"To what purpose is this waste? Is that what you would ask, my Nora?"

"Yes, it is. Think what a great deal of money these manuscripts would fetch from any publisher, and what a tremendous lot of good might be done with the money! Wouldn't it be better to found a hospital or an orphanage or something in memory of Mr. Webb than to keep a senseless promise which he extorted from you when probably he was delirious?"

"He wasn't delirious, Nora: he was perfectly conscious when he asked me to make the promise, and it is enjoined on the paper on the box."

"But so much good might be done with the money," persisted Nora.

"It might have been sold for three hundred pence and have been given to the poor," quoted her hus-

band; "nevertheless, dear child, I must keep my promise. Webb knew what he meant when he asked me to make it. Doesn't it strike you what it meant to him when you realise that he literally died of starvation rather than earn what he considered were the wages of sin, though the source of considerable wealth lay in that box all the time, and he knew it?"

Nora began to cry: "Poor, poor Mr. Webb!" she sobbed; "it is all too sad to think about; but he was a good man."

"He was one of the saints of God," said Michael gently, "but he never found it out."

"I expect he has found it out by now."

"I am sure he has."

And then they burned the heap of manuscripts.

When the last scrap of paper had been consumed, Nora said through her tears: "Oh! Michael, how terrible it is to think that all that poor man's genius and strength and capacity for feeling were utterly wasted."

"Not wasted, Nora: there is no such thing as waste in God's economy."

The following Sunday the vicar of Tetleigh preached a sermon on the success of failure from the text, "To what purpose is this waste?" He showed that futile efforts, disappointed hopes, unrequited loves, unfulfilled ideals, unrealised ambitions, misplaced trusts—none of these are really wasted; that it was only when the money had been spent and the alabaster box broken and the spikenard had

been spilled that the house was filled with the odour of the ointment.

People said that it was the best sermon he had ever preached: but he said it was the best sermon that Rufus Webb had ever preached: and perchance he was right.

All this time Laurence Baxendale was keeping away from Poplar Farm, and Nancy was slowly dying for the want of him. Anthony saw what was wrong with his favourite cousin, and for awhile held his peace upon the subject; but after a bit silence was unendurable to him, and he felt constrained to speak.

"I say, Nan," he airily remarked one day, "you don't seem in especially good spirits."

"Who could be in good spirits in such weather as this?" asked Nancy, looking at the rain which was drearily running down the window.

"I admit it would be difficult—and then it would be only spirits and water. By the way, why don't our friend Baxendale come back home again? He has been away an unconscionable time."

Nancy's pale face flushed: "How can he come back to live among people who have said such horrid things about him?"

"My dear child, sensitiveness as to the remarks of our neighbours is a sure symptom that our livers want attending to. No healthy animal cares a rap what its neighbours do or do not say about it. Therefore I should strongly advise friend Baxendale

to drown his woes in calomel, and return to rest in the house of his fathers; by which I mean the farm of his mother."

Nancy did not reply, and there was silence for a moment. Then Anthony suddenly blurted out: "I say, Nancy, I wish you wouldn't fret after that brute; he isn't worth it, Nancy; he really isn't."

"I suppose nobody is really worth fretting about," replied Nancy ruefully, "when you come to that; but that doesn't prevent you from doing it if you are that way inclined."

"Still I wish you wouldn't do it, Nancy: and especially about such a prig as Baxendale."

"I know I'm an idiot for doing it—nobody knows that better than I do; but I can no more help fretting after Laurence than I can help breathing. And it is so unlike me, too; I used to enjoy things so, and never to mind about anything: but after he came into my life, everything became different, and now I can no more put him out of my life again than I can change my skin and my spots, *à la* the leopard and the Ethiopian."

"Confound the fellow!" said Anthony under his breath.

"It is no use blaming him, Tony: he can no more help it than I can."

"You are the last girl that I should have expected to sacrifice her life to a brute of a man, after the fashion of a suttee, and rot of that kind."

Nancy laughed a sad little laugh, out of which all

the merriment had faded: "I couldn't have sacrificed myself on a common altar—not on an altar that hadn't been passed by an inspector and licensed by the local authorities, you know—but Laurence happened to be all that. He is the best, and the most honourable, and the highest-minded man I ever met; therefore I couldn't help loving him nor could I ever leave it off when once I had begun."

"I say, Nan, I wish you'd marry me, and forget all that Baxendale stuff."

Nancy looked up in amazement: "Marry you, Tony? What an idea! Why, I thought you were cut out to be an old bachelor."

"The ancients remarked, Call no man single till he is dead, or words to that effect; and they were intelligent people."

"But, Tony——"

"Oh! you needn't say you don't love me—I know that well enough, bless you! But I don't mind admitting you to my confidence to the extent of confiding in you that I do love you—little as your own conscience will tell you that you deserve such an honour: and I think I could cure you of that old Baxendale rot if you'd let me try. Do let me try, Nancy, there's a darling!"

Nancy shook her head: "No, Tony: I once gave myself, heart and soul, to Laurence Baxendale; and, whether he values the gift or not, I cannot take it back again. I am his for time and for eternity, even if he doesn't know it."

"Confound him!" repeated Anthony.

"And there is another reason why I couldn't marry you, Tony, even if I would. Can't you see that I am dying, and shall never marry anybody now?"

"Rubbish!" said Tony roughly.

"It isn't rubbish, dear. I am dying simply because I can't live without Laurence—just as other people die because they can't live without food or air or water. And even in dying, I only care about him. I know it's wicked of me, but the whole point of going to heaven at all seems to be that Laurence will be there, and that I shall walk in unending lanes with him through all eternity. That is all I care for. If the angels say to me when I get there, as people say in banks, 'How will you take it, Miss Burton?'—I shall say, 'One Laurence Baxendale, and the rest in lanes.' That's my idea of heaven." And Nancy went out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Confound the brute!" said Anthony under his breath once more. (Only this time he did not use the word "confound.")

CHAPTER XXI.

LADY ALICIA.

If a sin performed is worthy blame,
Is sin intended just the same?

After the New Year came in the weather was so severe and Nancy so fragile that Mr. and Mrs. Burton decided to take her to Mentone for a time, in order to see what a warmer climate would do for their darling: and simultaneously Lord and Lady Portcullis—with Lady Alicia Baxendale as their guest—likewise found refuge from the ferocity of an English spring in the south of France.

On his relations' departure from Drawbridge Castle, Baxendale returned to Poplar Farm; which return occurred just a week before the Burtons fled on the wings of the winter wind to where they hoped the winter wind could not reach them.

Poor Nancy never walked in the lanes now, for to her they were as one huge, green cemetery of buried hopes and joys; and not being the kind of woman who haunts burying-grounds, she wisely avoided them.

There are some natures that cling to the last resting-places of what they have loved, and delight to plant flowers there, watering these flowers with

tears; and there are others who cannot bear the agony which the mere sight of such sepulchres arouses, and who would, therefore, fain hide their dead away out of their sight, and let them be as though they had never been. God pity those bereaved hearts whose sole happiness lies in remembrance; for their sorrow is indeed great! But God help those more sorely afflicted ones whose sole happiness lies in forgetfulness; for their misery is infinitely greater!

Therefore, it never came to pass that Laurence met Nancy walking in the lanes, as they used so often to meet in the happy, far-off days; but on the Sunday he saw her face to face coming out of Tetleigh church, and the sight cut him to the heart. Was that thin, pale, careworn woman his sunny little Nancy? And was his the hand that had wiped the sunshine out of that bleached face, and written sorrow, in capital letters, all over it?

As his heart went out silently in an agony of pity toward the girl whose life he had deliberately spoiled, a wild hope took hold of Laurence that Nancy was innocent after all, and his mother the real culprit. He hated himself for wishing to prove his mother guilty; he felt that such a wish was despicable in the extreme; but he had never loved her as he had loved Nancy, and therefore her possible wrongdoing did not wound him to the quick as Nancy's did. He loved Lady Alicia so little that forgiveness toward her came easy to him: he loved Nancy

so much that he felt a sin of hers would be branded into his very soul, and that nothing could wipe it out forever. That his mother should be weighed in the balances and be found wanting was an endurable and by no means unexpected accident: but that Nancy should fall short of the ideal which he had formed of her was a calamity sufficient to make angels weep—a punishment which he felt was greater than he could bear. If, however, Lady Alicia had set fire to the Hall, then Nancy was as innocent as he himself; and there was no reason why he should not fall on his knees before her, and beg her pardon for even having distrusted her, and let her comfort his sore heart as she alone knew how to comfort it.

If Nancy was heartsick for Laurence, he was none the less heartsick for Nancy. The agony of separation was not killing him as it was killing her, because a man's physique is made of stronger elements than a woman's; but he hungered and thirsted and prayed and agonised not one whit less than she. She was the one human being to whom he had shown all that was in his heart—before whom he had poured out the hidden treasures of his soul; and—having once broken down the hedge of his reserve—the longing to do it again was almost uncontrollable; yet there was no one with whom he could do it save Nancy.

He still felt that his mother's crime would always be his disgrace: but he knew Nancy well enough to understand that she would be willing to share even

dishonour with him—and, what was more, he did not mind her sharing it. At last his love had shown itself stronger than his pride, and he realised that Nancy's pity would heal his sores rather than wound him afresh. But even yet his love was not strong enough to bear that his queen should do wrong and still remain his queen. It could stand anything but that Nancy herself should fall below his ideal of her: for this he felt he could never forgive her, because in that case her sin would be against herself rather than against him. He could forgive mere sins against himself; but for sins against the woman whom he worshipped there was no pardon to be found.

While Laurence's heart was daily softening toward Nancy, and his soul was hourly crying out for her, the Burtons and their daughter started for Mentone: and he looked in vain in all the familiar places for the pale little face which had become the centre of his universe. Nancy was now out of his reach.

But that did not put her out of his thoughts; in fact, it had a precisely opposite effect. All that early spring—when the roads were swept clean by the east wind, and the fields smelt of the daisies that were yet to be (for there is always a smell of future daisies in the air on the first spring days), Laurence's heart went out to Nancy, and cried for her as thirsty men cry for water in a barren and dry land where no water is. The more he thought about it the more

fully he became convinced that it was his mother who had set fire to Baxendale Hall; his poor, foolish mother, who had never been able in all her life to discover the distinction between good and evil—much less to choose the one and refuse the other. He remembered how she had begged him to do the deed himself, and how utterly futile had been his efforts to convince her that such a suggestion was of the nature of sin; and he knew her well enough to understand how she could succeed in convincing herself that she was actually performing a righteous act in fulfilling the old prophecy, as well as in making her son (as she thought) a rich man for the rest of his life.

The memory of Nancy's suggestion that he should burn down the house of his fathers—a suggestion which had been eating into his very soul for the last six months, and making his existence a burden to him—began gradually to fade from his memory. After all, he had laid too much stress on the girl's idle words, he told himself: was she not always talking nonsense which she did not in the least mean, and making absurd statements which she never expected to be believed?—and had he not shown himself an arrant fool in taking this one conversation of hers *au pied de la lettre,* instead of accepting it as the mere joke for which it was intended.

So during that spring Nancy once more regained her place in Laurence's life; and he eagerly looked forward to the time when he could take her into his

arms again, and pour out all his story of shame and sorrow and wounded sensibility into her sympathetic ear. He would make her understand him this time, he said to himself: he would never again be guilty of the folly of setting up a barrier of reserve between himself and the woman whom he adored. He would tell her the whole truth: how he believed that Lady Alicia was the culprit who had set Baxendale Hall in flames, and that therefore he could not take the insurance money: and he felt sure, when Nancy heard this, she would see the utter impossibility of his allowing himself to reap any pecuniary benefit from his mother's crime.

He could not write all this to Nancy: his suspicion against Lady Alicia must never be set down in black and white, lest the very birds of the air should carry it abroad: it must only be whispered into Nancy's ear, and locked up in her loving breast for the rest of their lives. So he decided to wait until she came back to Wayside, and to put everything straight between herself and him when they met.

The warmer climate of the sunny south did not do as much for Nancy as her parents had hoped. She lost her cough, and the doctors could find nothing organically wrong with her; but neither climate nor medicine can do much in the way of ministering to a mind diseased. Had the last miserable six months been blotted out, Nancy would speedily have become as strong and well as she had ever been in her life: but she could not forget things—she was

not made after that pattern—and the memory of what in one short year she had won and lost was killing her as surely as, if more slowly than, any disease defined by the faculty.

And yet she prayed to forget—she hated to remember: that was the hard part of it. There are sweet-natured women who can cherish their sorrow until it becomes to them a familiar friend on earth and a guide to heaven; who order their harmonious goings by the thought of what their loved ones would have wished, until upon these gentle souls those loved ones exercise a stronger influence than they ever exercised in the days of their flesh; and such women are tried by sorrow as by a refiner's fire, and come out as burnished gold. But Nancy was not after this kind. She was passionate rather than tender, and so the "grace of a day that is dead had no hold upon her." On the contrary, she chafed against it, and hated it, and longed to blot it forever out of the book of her remembrance. She wanted no tender memories of Laurence to occupy the place he had left vacant in her heart: she desired not that grief should "fill the room up of her absent love, and remember her of all his gracious parts;" gentler women would have wished this, but not Nancy. She wanted the man himself, just as he was, with all his over-scrupulousness and impracticability and unreasonableness, to have and to hold, for better, for worse, till death should them part. Failing this, she prayed for forgetfulness—prayed that he might

depart out of her existence altogether, and the memory of him might not trouble her again—that he would leave her free to live her own life, unvexed by the haunting shadows of what might have been. And yet she was so fashioned that oblivion was impossible to her; the boon she craved was strictly denied to her by the peculiarities of her own nature; the more she strove to hate and to forget, the more passionately did she love and the more vividly did she remember. For the which surely Heaven pitied her.

Spring had fully dawned when Lady Alicia came back to England and to Poplar Farm. Her son was delighted to see the change which the journey had wrought in her: she looked younger and happier (and consequently handsomer) than she had looked for years.

"I am so glad to see you so well, mother," said Laurence affectionately.

"Yes, dear Laurence, I know I look well; I noticed it myself in the looking-glass, which so often tells us anything but a flattering tale, as dear Somebody—I forget his name—remarked."

"It was the warm weather suited you."

"Ah! it was not only the climate, dear Laurence, that renewed my youth, though I confess sunshine is very sweet and soothing, even if somewhat trying to the complexion: but it does no real damage if one always wears a gauze veil. Your dear aunt's maid would not permit me—positively would not

permit me—to step out-of-doors without a white gauze veil; and I felt most grateful to her for her forethought. She is an excellent person—quite excellent; I don't know what I should have done without her."

Laurence sighed: "I wish I could afford for you to have a maid of your own, mother."

"Well, dear child, I cannot deny that a maid has a very beneficial effect upon a woman's character. You see, it is quite impossible to find leisure for cultivating one's higher nature if one has to do one's own hair and look after one's own wardrobe; and yet it is so sweet to cultivate one's higher nature if one can find time—almost a duty, in fact."

"I suppose it is." Laurence with difficulty repressed a smile.

"I always think dear Saint Peter—or was it Saint Paul's remark (I invariably mix the two up)—about a woman not plaiting her hair or putting on gold and apparel, but having a meek and quiet spirit instead, is so very beautiful and appropriate. But it is only those women who have a maid to see to the plaiting of the hair and the putting on of the apparel that get the time to attend to the development of the meek and quiet spirit. One woman really cannot undertake both departments herself; and yet it is so sad for either to be neglected."

"I suppose if you had only time for one, you would consider the former more important?" said Laurence.

"Of course, dear child, of course: because one loses caste if one's hair is badly done or one's clothes are shabby, while nobody thinks any the worse of one for not having a meek and quiet spirit. Not that I don't think it is very sweet and Christian to be both—I do indeed: but of course the things that show are always of more importance than the things that don't show. Anybody can see that."

"Of course." Laurence's tone was dry.

"And now I have a confession to make to you, dear Laurence, a most serious confession. I am afraid you will be very angry with me—you have a somewhat unreasonable temper, as your poor dear father had—but I feel sure you will pardon me in the end."

Laurence's heart stood still for a moment, and then went on at double-quick speed. So the confession he had prepared his mind to hear was coming at last, and his darling was about to be cleared from the slightest shadow of suspicion. "Well, what is it, mother?"

"You see, dear child, poverty is peculiarly repellent to any one of my refined and sensitive nature: and not only repellent—it is also positively injurious. It creates faults—or, rather, I should say, weaknesses—which otherwise would not exist, and which have never distinguished any of the Moates before; and it prevents the full development of virtues which properly belong to my character."

"Yes, yes; I hear." Laurence was impatient; but his mother was not going to be hurried.

"Therefore I feel it to be my duty to myself—and to all around me—to escape from a state which is so injurious to my higher nature. You see, it is the duty of us all to cultivate our higher natures—dear Saint Paul says something about working out our own salvation, and I am sure he means by this that we must avoid all things which are not profitable to us—in fact, he uses those exact words, if I remember rightly."

"And poverty is not profitable to your salvation. Is that what you mean, mother?"

"Yes, dear child; how quickly you comprehend things! If only your poor dear father had understood me as well as you do, what a much better and happier woman I might have been."

Laurence had his doubts as to the accuracy of the deduction: but he wisely refrained from putting them into words.

"Therefore I have felt for some time that it was my duty at all costs to escape from poverty. I was not doing myself or my higher instincts anything like justice; and it is so beautiful to do justice to one's highest and best self, whatever sacrifice it may involve."

"Even if it be Baxendale Hall itself that happens to be the burnt offering."

Lady Alicia sighed: "But that sacrifice was

wasted, you see, owing to your unfortunate wrong-headedness and obstinacy."

"Then what is the second sacrifice involved in this moral regeneration?"

"It is hardly a sacrifice, dear Laurence; though I shall always believe that Baxendale Hall was burned by a miracle in order to give my higher nature a chance of fuller development. I remember once coming upon a beautiful little poem about something 'for which I pant,' and fuller something else I want, which exactly expresses all that I feel."

Laurence could hardly control his impatience: "As I unfortunately spoiled sacrifice number one, for goodness' sake, tell me what sacrifice number two is: and be quick about it."

" It is not a sacrifice, as I have told you, dear Laurence; it is only a sweet, beautiful change and development. Dear Lord Watercress, with whom at Cannes I renewed my former friendship, has again asked me to be his wife, and I have accepted him."

Laurence was dumbfounded. He had never dreamt of his mother's marrying again.

"I think it is so touching and beautiful," continued Lady Alicia, "that I should be given another chance of happiness, after having been so foolish as to refuse him for the sake of your father all those years ago. As dear Shakespeare says, there is a divinity which puts things straight again, however much we may make a mull of them ourselves."

Then Laurence found words: "I hope Lord

Watercress will make you very happy, mother," he said gently.

"I am sure he will, dear child; he has twenty thousand a year and two most charming places. He says we must each go our own way, and neither be bothered with the other, as there is money enough for both. So different from your poor dear father, who was always wanting me to be with him, and never could be happy without me! Ah, dear Lord Watercress could have given him a lesson in unselfishness!"

"We'll leave my father out of the conversation altogether, if you don't mind, mother, and devote our attention to—his successor."

"You see, dear Laurence, I am sure it is my duty to marry a rich man if I can; and it is very sweet of you to take it so nicely. You don't seem a bit angry, and I was so afraid you would be."

"No, I am not angry. I've no right to be."

"And I want to tell you something else just to show you what a lot of harm poverty was doing to my character; and how necessary it is for me to be rich if I am to be as good as I should like to be—and as I ought to be, for it is everybody's duty to be good, don't you think?"

"I suppose so; but it's a pretty hard job sometimes!"

"Of course you will keep what I'm going to tell you quite a secret, won't you?"

"Mother, is it necessary to ask me that?"

"Well, then," said Lady Alicia, in a nervous, deprecating manner, totally unlike her usual calm serenity—"would you believe it of me, dear Laurence?—I so hated being poor that I made up my mind to set fire to Baxendale Hall on purpose to get the insurance money! I did indeed! Isn't it awful to think that poverty could bring a gentlewoman and a Moate to such a strait as that?" And her ladyship began to cry.

"Don't cry, mother, dear, but tell me all about it." Laurence was putting a tremendous restraint upon himself.

"That is all: and it is bad enough, goodness knows! I see now how wicked of me it would have been; but at that time I wanted money so dreadfully that I didn't care what sin I committed to get it."

"Then didn't you carry out your intention after all?" asked Laurence, with a strange, tight feeling round his heart.

"No, no," sobbed Lady Alicia; "but that was no credit to me. It was when I was contemplating this wicked step that somebody forestalled me—goodness knows who!—and actually did what I had intended to do. And then—when I heard what people said and thought about the crime—I realised what a lucky woman I have been just to have escaped committing it. You see, I never knew how wrong it was till I heard other people say so."

Laurence fell on his knees at his mother's feet: "Mother, swear to me that you are speaking the

truth—that you did not carry out your intention. Remember, even if you did, I would freely forgive you, and keep the secret with my life."

"No, I didn't do it, Laurence: indeed I didn't. Though I don't see that I am really much better than if I had. It was not my fault that I didn't carry out my sinful intention. Oh, it is dreadful to think that I—a Moate—could have sunk so low!"

Laurence stretched out a trembling hand and seized a Bible that was lying on his mother's work table: "Will you kiss this and swear that it wasn't you who set fire to the Hall?"

Lady Alicia kissed the book: "I swear that it was not I," she said solemnly; "though I feel my guilt is the same as if it were."

Laurence rose from his knees with his face as white as a sheet, for he knew that his mother was speaking the truth.

She rose also: "I think I will go to bed now. Of course you will never mention to dear Lord Watercress what I have just told you."

"I swear I will never mention it to anybody as long as I live," replied Laurence, kissing her. "Good night, mother; I hope you will be very happy."

When Lady Alicia had left the room he sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. "So Nancy is the culprit after all," he groaned; "and I love her as I love my own soul."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LANES AGAIN.

In spite of all the ways you tried
To stifle him with vain endeavour,
Love never for a moment died
But lives forever.

BAXENDALE no doubt ought to have rejoiced to find that his suspicions were incorrect so far as Lady Alicia was concerned. He felt this very strongly himself, and acknoweldged in his heart that his modified satisfaction proved him to be a most undutiful son. Yet he had an excuse—so he had convinced himself—in the fact of the guilty person's being neither his mother nor Nancy; so that the exculpation of the one meant the implication of the other. Wherefore the dutiful son gave way to the devout lover: which was human nature.

None the less, he repented him of having done his mother an injustice—although Lady Alicia's confession of her unlawful intention robbed this injustice of most of its grossness: and he tried in every way to make up to her for the imagination of his heart by an unwonted tenderness.

Yet he could not conceal from himself that his cup of misery was well-nigh overflowing. So long

as a doubt existed in his mind as to whether of the twain was the culprit, he was able to give the benefit of the doubt to Nancy. He had been wretched enough, no doubt; yet the fact that the guilt of neither was assured seemed somehow to relieve both of the stigma. Now, however, he knew that his mother was as good as guilty; and he also was driven to the conclusion that her actual innocence fixed the crime on Nancy. Consequently his heart was filled with grief and bitterness.

Nancy—a culprit! That was the fact, the horrible fact, that stared him in the face. He hated himself for doubting her: yet as he turned the matter over and over again in his mind, his reason would not let him come to any other conclusion. It is hard for a man when his reason apparently makes it impossible for him to believe the truths he learned as a child: it is harder still when his reason takes an opposite course, and makes it impossible for him to believe that the one who is dearer to him than life itself is worthy of his love.

At this period of his life Baxendale went through a time of storm and stress that left a lasting impress upon his character. He did his best to tear Nancy from his heart: but it was all in vain. It may be possible—or it is sometimes necessary for a man to pluck out his offending eye or cut off his offending right hand; but to exorcise from his heart the woman who has firmly ensconced herself therein is an operation which a certain type of man cannot perform

and yet live: of which type was Laurence Baxendale. The memories—bitter memories they were—of her lovely eyes and her bright wit, of her sweet temper and cheerful stoicism, of her tolerant good nature and tender sympathy, would come back and flood his soul. At such times his heart would rise superior to his reason, and he would swear to himself that one so sweet and noble could never be guilty—even for one she loved—of conduct so dishonourable. Then would come the reaction of common sense: and the facts which all pointed her out as the doer of the deed became unto him convincing evidence.

Yet throughout all this turmoil of doubt and despair he loved her still: nay, he loved her better than ever. He seemed possessed by an overmastering passion which he strove in vain to control. Then arose a struggle in his heart between his love and his pride: pride demanded the sacrifice of Nancy on the altar of stainless ancestry and outraged family propriety: love putting in a pitiful little plea for mercy, which he felt had no justification whatsoever. That mercy would tend to his own personal satisfaction and comfort was to Baxendale a powerful argument in favour of severity: he would not have been the fit descendant of men who had died in defending the property of the Church in the time of Henry the Eighth, and in supporting the cause of the King in the time of Oliver Cromwell, if this had not been so. Thus the struggle went on—a struggle which was

none the less severe because silent, and which told on Baxendale more than he would have cared to own. He shunned society more than ever; he became irritable and moody; he carried out all the routine work of the estate with exemplary care, but he had plenty of time on his hands. As he abjured any companionship, he devoted his spare time to wandering about and thinking of Nancy, and holding the balance between pride and his love; but he never went into the lanes where he and Nancy used to walk in the golden days of old: that, he felt, was more than he could bear.

Matters also were going on very hardly with Nancy. She was one of those women who are like thoroughbred horses: she would go on until she dropped. But it was borne in upon her that the time of dropping was near at hand. Although she likewise had hitherto studiously avoided the lanes, one afternoon when she was feeling specially low, a curious idea came to her that she would go to the stile where Laurence had first kissed her, and there bid farewell to her brief spell of perfect bliss.

By some subtle action of that force which men in their ignorance call Chance—though it may be the Providence which shapes our ends—Laurence Baxendale became possessed of a similar notion on that same afternoon. He had lately been finding the struggle to forget Nancy a little too much for him. Pride, though making a gallant fight of it, was playing a losing game. It only wanted a little more: at

a touch he was—although he knew it not—prepared to yield. So it came to pass that he found himself, almost to his own surprise, wandering down the winding lanes where he and Nancy had passed such happy hours. The sweet memories of those days of bliss came back to him, and with them a passionate desire to see that dear face again—ah! how sad it was when he saw it!—to kiss again a look of happiness into those blue eyes, to bring back the old brightness, the old mirth. What mattered those dead and gone ancestors of his, what mattered his own pride of race, compared with Nancy? Had not his mother meditated the very deed for which he condemned the girl? It was for no mercenary motives he knew that she had done the deed: in a moment of thoughtlessness she had done it for love. For love! Yes, her love for him was so great that she had dared even a crime for his sake. He looked into his own heart, and asked himself who was he to pass judgment upon her? He had never committed a crime, it is true: yet did he not confess himself every Sunday a miserable sinner, and with truth? And should he, a sinner like the other Galileans, condemn her for a mad deed done for love?

As he thought on these things he looked up, and behold! there was Nancy herself at the stile. She did not see him: but at the sight of her the last vestige of pride disappeared. He was filled with a passionate love; but with his love there came a new feeling—humility. While not condoning

Nancy's fault, he condemned himself for his Pharisaism—for how did he differ from him who thanked God that he was not as this publican? Dare he approach her? Dare he speak to her? How would she receive him? These thoughts crowded thickly upon his brain. He hesitated for a moment, and then walked on.

"My darling," he said softly.

Nancy looked up with a startled cry.

"You, you!" she cried, "why do you come here to torment me? You have destroyed my happiness and spoiled my life: can you not leave me to die in peace?"

Laurence was stricken with remorse at her words; still more at the sight of her face.

"Nancy," he whispered gently, "can you ever forgive me? I have come to tell you that I am sorry. I was mad when I said that we must part. I cannot live without you. Sweetheart, I love you, I love you!"

Nancy still looked at him with dilated eyes. She seemed not to have heard a word he said.

"So you have come to gloat upon the ruin you have wrought; to see what a wreck a woman can become who has been fool enough to love a man! Truly, a kind thought, a manly action!"

"How can you speak so bitterly, my own love? I am here to own my fault and to beg your forgiveness. Can you not understand that I adore you; that I cannot live without you?"

Nancy shook her head sadly.

"You should have thought of that before. It is your own doing. You said that we must see each other no more—you threw me aside without a thought. If you now see that it was all a mistake, you have only yourself to blame."

Baxendale found this reception a rude shock. He had looked at the matter from his own point of view alone, and had supposed, now that he was ready to overlook Nancy's crime, he had only to propose a renewal of their own relations to be received with open arms. He was not prepared to find any reluctance on the girl's part to a renewal of their lease of love. He had been so consumed by his conviction of Nancy's guilt that he had taken for granted that she was aware that he knew. It had never occurred to him to look at the matter from her side, or to imagine that he had failed in any way in what was due from him to her; so that her attitude came upon him with a shock of surprise. He was in a difficult position: he was anxious, nay, eager to take her again to himself: he had a passionate desire to clasp her in his arms, and swear that nothing in heaven or earth should separate them again. But he could hardly say to her, "My dear, I know you are a criminal, but I am prepared to overlook the fact." And unless he said something of the kind, it would be hard for him to explain his past conduct should she demand an explanation. He had expected her to jump into his arms at the first hint of a relenting

from his stoical attitude: it was, perhaps, a useful lesson for him to find that pride was not a monopoly of the Baxendale family. So many families have an idea that pride and sensitiveness are peculiar to themselves—as white cattle to Chartley, and black rabbits to Hawkestone.

"I know I have only myself to blame," he said at last humbly; "but you would be merciful and forgiving if you knew the state of misery I have been in for the last six months."

"It has been all your own doing."

"I know it; but that makes it the worse. Hell is not the less hell because a man has prepared it for himself," said Baxendale, with some bitterness.

"And do you suppose I have not been miserable, too? In your pity for yourself, have you never had a thought to waste on me?" cried Nancy; "it is the old story: a man plays with a woman's heart as he plays with a football: it is a good game and requires some skill. And when the heart is broken and he cannot play with it any more, he just gets a new ball and goes on with the game. One ball is as good as another for him. Naturally—being a man—it is the game itself he cares for; not the necessary implements."

"Heaven knows you are doing me an injustice," cried Baxendale passionately; "I have loved you all through: when I have seemed most cold and most heartless, I have adored you most."

"You had a strange way of showing it."

"I hoped and thought you would forget me when you were in fresh scenes and saw new faces. No one knows how cut to the heart I was when I saw your face on your return, and recognised how much you had suffered."

"Why did you not tell me so?" asked Nancy.

"Why did I not?" replied her lover; "I cannot tell you; you must not ask me. But believe me, my darling, that I love you more than life itself. I am filled with remorse for all the suffering I have caused you, and if you will only forgive me, I will have but one object for the future—your happiness."

Nancy did not speak, so Laurence went on: "I cannot offer you a luxurious home such as you are accustomed to; but I can at least offer you reasonable comforts. My mother, you may have heard, is about to marry again. For the future I shall not have her to support, nor"—here Laurence winced—"have to pay the premiums on the insurance. I do not wish there to be any mistake—so I will say at once that I cannot—it is not I will not, but I cannot—take the insurance money. But my income, though small, will enable me to maintain you without that."

Baxendale paused after this lengthy and somewhat unlover-like speech. On the whole, he might have done worse. During the recitation of these prosaic details, Nancy had time to recover herself, and the subtle influence of the man began to make itself felt. When Laurence paused, Nancy said:

"You don't suppose I care a straw about your money or your comforts or your luxuries, do you?"

Laurence was quick to perceive a change in her tone.

"Nancy, darling," he whispered, "don't you know where we are? Don't you remember the dear old stile, and the lovely times we used to anticipate. It cannot be all over. You *will* forgive me, won't you? You love me; I know you love me: and we could be so happy together."

As he spoke, his arm stole gently round her waist. Nancy did not withdraw herself, though she stiffened slightly.

"Sweetheart," he went on, and his voice shook in its passionate entreaty, "you do not know how much I love you. I adore you. I love your sweet eyes, I love your dear face. Look up, my beloved. Surely the winter is over, and the summer is at hand. You love me, my darling; say that you love me and will forgive me."

"You said that it was better that we should see each other no more."

"If I did, I lied."

"You preferred your pride to me."

"If I did, I was a fool. But love, glorious love, has conquered pride, and you have conquered me."

They had walked a short distance from the stile: now by mutual consent they turned and walked back in silence. When they reached it, Laurence again

whispered, "Nancy—my own darling—cannot you love me just a little?"

And Nancy looked up with swimming eyes. She did not speak, but her look was enough for Laurence. Their lips met in a long kiss, and the estrangement was at an end.

And they were happy, supremely happy, ridiculously happy. For the time Laurence forgot his suspicions—indeed, he determined to blot them out of his remembrance. As for Nancy, the bloom already began to come back into her pale cheeks, and her blue eyes were bright with her deep love.

"Laurence, dear," she said, "you have made me very miserable in the past. But I am almost glad of it: because now it throws up the new happiness like something done in bas-relief, or looked at through a stereoscope, don't you know?"

"And you forgive me, my own?"

"I forgive you—but on one condition, that you never refer to all this horridness again. Let it be as if it had never been. We won't remember the miserable time: we will be happy in the future. When Nora and I were little and the games went wrong, and we quarrelled over them, we used to say, 'Let's pretend it didn't happen;' and then we began the game all over again in peace. It was such a good plan, because it didn't leave any sore places. And now I say again, 'Let's pretend it didn't happen,' and we'll begin the game all over again, and leave no sore places."

And so they went on, hand in hand, wrapped up in their present bliss. And, in spite of all her cleverness, it never once entered Nancy's head that her lover indeed suspected her, since his present behaviour seemed so satisfactorily to prove the contrary.

So little do men and women—even when they are in love with each other—read each other's inmost thoughts.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE PROFESSOR'S VISIT.

Love evermore is fresh and young;
So may it please your Royal Highness
To banish from your mother tongue
Such words as *Finis*.

THERE was great delight all through Tetleigh and the neighbourhood thereof when the engagement of Mr. Baxendale to Miss Burton was announced. An engagement which one has seen coming on is always so much more flattering to one's self-esteem (and therefore more popular in proportion) than an engagement which suddenly jumps out upon one and takes one completely by surprise. The former shows us how wise and foreseeing all we onlookers have been; while the latter proves (or, rather, tries to prove) that we can see only what is under our own noses and no further through a stone wall than other people: which deduction, is, of course, absurd.

Although it might be a fine alliance socially for Nancy, it was by no means a brilliant match from a pecuniary point of view, and to this fact Mr. Burton could not close his paternal eyes; but now that Lady Alicia was provided for, Laurence could justly afford to keep a wife, and, moreover, Nancy's mind

was made up to marry him or die; and she had shown such unmistakable signs of actually fulfilling the latter alternative if the former were denied her that her father decided in his own mind that as—according to Solomon—a living married daughter was better than a dead single one, or words to that effect, he would not withhold his consent to Nancy's becoming the wife of Laurence Baxendale.

As for the two lovers themselves, words could not describe their happiness. It is true that there is no heartsickness harder to bear than that of hope long deferred; but, on the other hand, there is no tree of life whereof the fruit is sweeter than that of the long-deferred desire at last fulfilled; and now Laurence and Nancy were enjoying this fruit to the fullest extent of their by no means limited powers. Compensation is one of the great laws of life; and those people whose hearts' desires have been given to them at the mere request of their lips, have no idea of the ecstasy of bliss vouchsafed to those whose happiness arrives late, after having tarried long upon the way.

In the sunshine of her restored happiness Nancy soon began to grow strong and well again: while Laurence resolutely put away from him all remembrance of the crime which had once well-nigh wrecked his life, and decided that as he had forgiven so much he would forget.

Lady Alicia was married very quietly to her old lover in London on the twelfth of June; Nancy's

wedding was fixed to take place at Tetleigh church on the tenth of September; and in the interval it happened that Professor Gottfried, a most distinguished scientist with whom the Arbuthnots had made friends on their honeymoon, came to stay at the vicarage for a few days.

The professor was not one of those clever people whose chins are always in the air; he was one of those men of genius who know that nothing is beneath the notice of Man since nothing is beneath the notice of God: so he was immensely interested in everything that was going on around him, and—having learned much—was always longing to learn more. While he was staying at Tetleigh he heard the story of the burning of Baxendale Hall and the mystery connected with it, and his attention was immediately aroused thereby.

Over and over again he made Michael and Nora describe to him every detail of the incident with all the evidence that told so strongly against Laurence, until they grew weary of the recital; and then Nora suggested that they should take him up to the ruins of the Hall, so that he might study the question more minutely upon the very scene of the tragedy. So it came to pass one glorious afternoon in August that the Arbuthnots, Professor Gottfried, Laurence, Nancy, and Nancy's two small brothers strolled up to examine all that was left of Baxendale Hall.

It was a lovely day; just such another day as that which had preceded the catastrophe exactly a year

ago, only there was no gale this August as there had been last; one of those perfect summer afternoons when Nature seems to be at a standstill, simply because there is nothing better to do than she has already done—she is at her wits' end how to find another treat for her already spoiled children.

They walked slowly through the lanes—those lanes which were as holy ground to at least two of the party, who considered the others guilty of sacrilege in daring to walk there at all—until they reached the Park, and then across the velvet grass to the ruins, which stood gaunt and grim and blackened, the one inharmonious touch in the idyllic picture of English summer time. Then Laurence took the professor all over his devastated home, pointing out as fully as he could where the fire broke out and how it travelled. The man of science followed him with absorbing interest.

"It is most strange, most strange!" he kept saying; "I cannot at all find it out."

"It never will be found out now, I expect," replied Laurence; adding under his breath, "and hope."

But Professor Gottfried had no such wish. It was his business to solve problems and to make discoveries, and he did not like to be beaten.

"It must haf been set on fire from the inside," he continued: "there is no doubt of that. To set a house on fire from the outside, and to begin on the upper storey, is a most impossible and not-to-be-believed-in thing. Yet the ground floor by the fire

quite untouched has been. But why did you not this floor roof over again before everything was spoiled?"

"Because I couldn't afford to do so," said Laurence simply.

"Ach! but it is a bother not things to be able to afford."

"It is: there's no doubt of that." And the master of Baxendale laughed somewhat bitterly.

"And there was no one in the house living, you tell me, at the time; even the caretakers had for a short holiday gone away. Was that not so?"

"Yes."

"And they had all keys into your hands before going given? So did Arbuthnot tell me."

"That is so." Laurence hated this endeavour to discover a secret which his chief desire now was to keep inviolate. He had forgiven Nancy with all his heart; but he was by no means sure that the world—if it found out her guilt—would be equally ready to forgive her; and he was quite certain that he did not wish the world ever to have the chance. So he tried to divert the professor's attention. "If you will come with me across the lawn to that clump of beech-trees on the other side, I will give you a glimpse into five counties," he said.

But it required a stronger man than Baxendale to divert the professorial mind when once it had set itself to the solution of a particular problem.

"I do not want to see five counties—no, nor fifty

counties: I do want the mystery of this house to solve."

"It's no good trying to do that, professor; we've all tried, and have given it up as a bad job; and you'll be compelled to do the same."

"Ach! what nonsense you young men do talk and how idle you are! 'A bad job,' indeed! Who ever heard of in mathematics 'a bad job'? To every question there is an answer if only one can find it; and I mean this one to find out before I go."

"It's no good, professor; you'd better take my advice and give it up."

But the professor was not to be baulked. He pottered about the ruins for another hour with Laurence at his heels, and then was so hot and tired that he was obliged to join the group sitting under the beech-trees and partake of a tea which Mrs. Candy had carried up from her cottage in a basket.

"What a perfect afternoon it is!" exclaimed Nora, with a sigh of absolute contentment, laying her hand upon her husband's, and looking at her sister from whose face joy was already beginning to play the part of india rubber and erase sorrow's handwriting: "Nancy, dear, do you ever wonder what you have done to deserve such happiness?"

Nancy shook her head: "No; but I sometimes wonder what Laurence has."

"Isn't it funny that food always tastes so much nicer out-of-doors than it does indoors?" remarked that young lady when the meal was well under way;

"I believe that even boiled mutton or rice-pudding would seem regular delicacies in the open air."

"Food eaten out-of-doors is nice even to read about in books," said Nora.

Her sister agreed: "Yes, isn't it? Now when you read about Robin Hood and people of that sort taking venison-pasties and stoups of claret in the 'merrie greenwood' (spelled with *ie* instead of *y*), it sounds the most delicious fare; yet I'm certain that claret handed round in stoups (whatever a stoup may be) would taste awfully sour in a modern dining-room; and as for venison——!"

"Well, what's wrong with venison?" asked Laurence, with a smile, as Nancy paused. He was already unconsciously acquiring the manner peculiar to those men who are blessed with brilliant wives: he led up to her best stories, played up to her smartest repartees; and—when she was in full swing—his lips moved slightly, as do the lips of prompters in amateur theatricals.

"Oh! venison is nothing but mutton with its head turned; and it's as troublesome as are all the people whose heads have been turned. You never can catch it at the right moment, like a pear or an eclipse, don't you know? It has either not been kept long enough, when it is mutton and too tough to eat, or else it has been kept too long, in which case either it or you has to leave the house at once in favour of the other; and then to return to your mutton is dangerous to life from a sanitary point of view."

While Nancy was rattling on in her old, airy, inconsequent fashion, with nobody but Laurence paying much attention to what she said, Professor Gottfried was showing the little boys some grass and flowers through a powerful magnifying-glass which he happened to have in his pocket.

Suddenly Arthur raised the glass and regarded the surrounding landscape through it: "I say, Amby," he cried, "do come here and see how funny all the trees and everything look through this."

Ambrose flew to his brother's side, and gazed through the glass with one blue eye, puckering up the other until every muscle on that side of his small face was taut. "It is awfly queer!" he exclaimed; "everything looks so big and wobbly, doesn't it? as if the world was full of water. Let's pretend we're at the bottom of the sea, and the trees are made of sea-weed!"

"Let me look," said Nancy, whose finger was not long out of any pie. She could not bear to be outside of things.

After she had gazed her fill—which was a very short one—Laurence took the glass from her (more for the pleasure of touching her fingers, it must be admitted, than from any desire to behold the phenomenon which it presented), and idly raised it to his eyes.

"It makes me feel like a child again," he remarked after a moment; "there used to be a flaw in the

nursery window here which magnified things when you looked through it; and—as Ambrose said—made everything wobbly and watery. I, likewise, remember pretending the world was the bottom of the sea in those days when I looked through that particular pane in the old nursery window."

"Eh! What is that? what is that?" cried the professor, with suddenly awakened interest.

"I was only saying that looking through your glass at this view reminded me of looking through my old nursery window; as there was a flaw in one of the panes there that magnified everything," replied Laurence languidly. The professor's almost childish interest in trifles and curiosity regarding the same bored him considerably.

Professor Gottfried started to his feet, and clapped his hands in an ecstasy of enthusiasm, thereby upsetting his tea and bread-and-butter in one fell crash. "I have it, I have it!" he cried; "the mystery of the fire at last is cleared. The never-to-be-solved problem is solved! The bad job is not to be given up any more, but is a very good job after all!"

"What on earth do you mean, professor?" asked the vicar in amazement, while the others looked on, imagining that too much learning had made the little German mad.

"I mean that to me it has been given the great mystery of this house to solve: I mean that I do know how Baxendale Hall was by accident burned;

that is what I do mean!" And the professor fairly skipped with excitement.

Laurence's face turned as white as a sheet: "For Heaven's sake, tell us what you are driving at!" he said between his teeth.

"Listen, pay attention, and I will tell you all," cried the professor; "see, the thing is quite simple. But tell me first: was the nursery to the library at all near?"

"It was next to it," replied Laurence; "and on the same floor."

"And for what was it, after the Hall was shut up, used?"

"As a sort of overflow meeting for the library," Laurence answered; "some books and papers, for which there wasn't room in the library were stored there." He kept himself well in hand, but he could not quite hide the trembling of the fingers that twirled his moustache in a vain show of indifference.

"Then it is all as child's play simple," fairly shouted Professor Gottfried: "When the sun did shine upon the able-to-magnify flaw in the window the flaw did become a fire-glass; and so the great sun himself did thus to the books and papers in the room set fire. See here!" And while they stood breathless with surprise at the professor's discovery, he held his magnifying-glass where the hot August sunlight could fall upon it, and quickly burned a large hole in Mrs. Candy's best tablecloth.

Nancy was the first to find words: "Then you believe it was the sun that set fire to Baxendale Hall? And, if so, the old prophecy was actually fulfilled; for the sun is thrice as great as King or State, and a thousand times stronger and higher."

"I make no doubt, dear young lady, that it was none other than the great sun himself that did the crime commit. Who else could have the library entered without first opening the door and walking up the stairs? The fire would in the afternoon begin, when the sun at the southwest windows was shining in; and for hours it would smoulder, and then it would into a flame burst, and the strong wind would fan it, and the books and the papers would like so much tinder burn."

Nancy's face was pale with excitement, and her eyes were dim with joyful tears: "Yes, yes; I'm sure you are right. And, oh! I'm so glad that the secret has been found out at last!"

Suddenly the professor's jaw fell: "But stop; I do not see; why did the sun that particular afternoon to Baxendale Hall set fire, when for a hundred years or more he had been on that very window shining every day?"

"I know," cried Nancy, "the great tree at the back of the Hall was blown down by the gale the day before; so that the sun shone for the first time on the nursery window that particular afternoon."

Professor Gottfried positively flung his arms round Nancy in his exuberance: "That is it, that is

it, clever, clever girl! That does everything most clearly explain. The tree which had always that window shaded did fall: the sun on the flaw in the glass did shine: the flaw in the window did as the sun-glass act, and did to the books and papers on which the sunlight fell set fire: the books and papers did so quickly burn that the fire to the house did itself extend: the strong wind did fan the flame so fast that they like wildfire did travel, and so in one day and night Baxendale Hall was down burned."

"Then no one entered the Hall that afternoon." It was Laurence that spoke, but the voice was not his own.

"No one, no one: if they had, the fire discovered would have been. When you, as you told me, in the morning of that day were here, the sun had not on the window shone, and the fire had not begun. It was when the sun on the west front of the house was shining that the flaw in the pane of glass to the Hall did set fire: and then no one even into the house again did come."

"And this explains why the fire started from the upper storey," continued Laurence in the same unnatural voice.

"It does all things connected with this matter explain," replied the professor; "it does explain how the fire from inside and upstairs did begin; and how it did begin though all the doors were locked, for the sun can without any keys enter."

Professor Gottfried's words brought full convic-

tion to the minds of all his hearers; and the sudden enormous relief was almost more than Laurence could bear. So he turned away in silence, and went down into the beech wood that fringed the lawns of his old home, and there struggled to regain that self-control over his feelings of which the unexpected joy produced by the professor's discovery had almost robbed him.

After a few minutes Nancy left the group that was so busily engaged in discussing Professor Gottfried's solution of the Baxendale mystery—finding fresh proofs of its truth in every new aspect and consideration—and followed her lover into the wood.

"Darling," she said, laying a caressing hand upon his arm, which was still trembling, "I am so glad."

Laurence could not speak; but he raised the little hand to his lips and covered it with kisses.

So it came to pass that the mystery of Baxendale Hall was solved at last by the ingenuity of Professor Gottfried. All the false suspicions and the heart-burnings which they had caused were over forever, and everybody was heartily ashamed of having suspected everybody else. The professor's discovery made a considerable sensation both socially and scientifically; and for a time people were almost as much afraid of magnifying-glasses as they were of gunpowder and dynamite. The insurance company was so thoroughly satisfied with the professor's explanation of the otherwise inexplicable mystery that

it again expressed its willingness to pay to Mr. Baxendale the sum to which he was entitled: and this time he had no option—and no desire—but to avail himself of his rights. And after much consideration and discussion, he and Nancy decided that they would invest seventy thousand pounds and live upon the income thereof, settling the capital upon the estate; and that they would spend the other thirty thousand pounds in building a new house upon the old foundations—a house not too large for their present means, and yet capable of being added to should further prosperity shine in the future upon the Baxendale family.

One sunny afternoon—about a fortnight before their marriage—Laurence and Nancy were sitting together upon the old stile which had proved such an important stage property in the drama of their lives, and they were going over for the two hundred and fiftieth time the story of the burning of Baxendale. They had just gone over—for the two thousandth and fiftieth time—the story of their love for each other and the peculiar unsmoothness of its course; so they turned their attention to the fire as a slight diversion before beginning the two thousandth and fifty-first recital of the more interesting narrative.

"You were awfully silly to mind all the nonsense that stupid people talked about your having done it yourself," remarked Nancy in conclusion.

"I daresay I was: I often am awfully silly, you

know—it is a way I have. But I did mind it confoundedly, nevertheless."

"Foolish boy! As if anybody who had ever had so much as a bird's-eye view of you could seriously suspect you of doing anything that Sir Richard Lovelace and the Chevalier Bayard hadn't done every day of their lives."

"But they did suspect me, my sweetheart—and those who have enjoyed considerably more than a bird's-eye view of me—and example speaks louder than precept, you know."

"But they didn't really suspect you: they only pretended they did, just for the fun of the thing, because it's always so interesting to suspect people of doing what you know they couldn't possibly have done. Half the fun of being good is that it gives such flavour and point to your few lapses, while the lapses of habitually faulty people entirely lack this charm."

Laurence stroked Nancy's cheek with his forefinger: "What shockingly immoral teaching!"

"Well, it's quite true. Think how glorious it is when mother upsets her tea or father his claret on the tablecloth—yet if I or the boys do such a thing there is no real joy in it at all. And that is why people pretended that they thought you had set fire to the Hall: if you'd been less sans-peur-and-sans-reprochy there'd have been no point in even suggesting such a thing."

"My darling," said Laurence after a pause, still

fondling the cheek which he had made so pale, "did *you* ever think I had done it?"

Nancy's blue eyes grew round with amazement. "*I?*—good gracious, no! I'm not such a goose as all that. Though I was so foolish as to fall in love with you, I have still sense enough left not to suspect you of any redeeming fallibility, and honesty enough not to pretend that I do. Let my folly stand out in its true colours: having discovered a man who is absolutely perfect, I have been idiotic enough to promise to marry him; although he never attempted to conceal any of his virtues, nor assumed any faults which he was not so fortunate as actually to possess."

"My dearest, I've something horrible to confess to you: I wonder if you can ever forgive me."

"Of course I can: I'm silly enough for anything where you are concerned. What is it? Fire away."

Laurence stooped down and hid his face in Nancy's lap: "I know I was a brute—a devil: you can't be more disgusted with me than I am with myself, and if you refuse to marry me after you hear what I am going to say, I cannot blame you. My darling, I actually believed all the time that it was you who had set fire to the Hall, more shame to me! Now, can you ever bring yourself to forgive me?"

There was a pause: then Nancy said slowly: "You believed that it was me all the time?"

Laurence groaned: "Yes; curse my blind folly!"

"When did you find out that it wasn't me after all?"

"When old Gottfried found out how it really had been done."

"Not till then?"

"No, not till then."

"And you asked me to marry you, believing that I was the guilty person?"

"I couldn't help it. I loved you so that I meant to marry you whatever you had done. Guilty or not guilty, you were the only woman in the world for me. But I shall never forgive myself for thinking you guilty; and I feel I cannot ask you to forgive me. Oh, my darling, what a brute I have been to you! And although I was so vile as to suspect you, my own innocent angel, you were believing in me all the time! My sweetheart, I am not fit to touch the hem of your garment." And poor Laurence groaned once more in the anguish of his soul.

But Nancy did not groan: she laid her hand on her lover's head while her eyes shone like stars: "My dear, I've nothing to forgive; you have made me prouder than I ever was in my life before. I don't blame you for suspecting me, because I'd once suggested that you should burn the Hall yourself, if you remember, though I only said it in fun. And then I'd got the keys. So there was nothing in that. But what makes me so proud and happy is that your love for me was great enough to overcome all ob-

stacles, even your suspicion that I had done the thing which you abhorred! Oh! my darling, my darling, I know now how much you love me! God grant that I may prove myself worthy of such love!"

And Nancy took the bowed head into her arms, and covered it with passionate kisses.

A new house stands now on the site of old Baxendale Hall—a picturesque, red-brick house, designed after the fashion of the Elizabethans, but with every Victorian comfort and convenience. And it smiles across the valley at Silverhampton Church on the opposite hill, as its three predecessors smiled before it: but now there is no shadow on its smile—no shadow of a curse as yet unfulfilled. And to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the new house and the old church bring the same message—the message that good is stronger than evil, and therefore is bound to conquer in the end, be the warfare never so long and the battle never so bitter. To all who possess their souls in patience, it is given to see the morning joy which is the sure successor of the night of weeping—to behold the marvellous light which must finally disperse all clouds and darkness, either here and now, where there fall other shadows and where fresh clouds return after the rain, or else in that fairer country where there is no need of the sun to lighten it, and where the winter is over and past for evermore.

So the story of the Baxendales ends well—as all stories must inevitably end, if we will only wait long

enough; but the end is not always yet, and we are in such a hurry. Since good is stronger than evil, and truth than falsehood, and blessing than cursing, no story can possibly end badly: while it is going on badly we know that this is not the end: just as we know that the end of anything is only the beginning of something better—and always must be, as long as "God's in His heaven" and "all's right with the world."

Once more the Baxendales can dwell under their own roof-tree, and till their own lands in peace, unhampered by the conviction that again their home will be destroyed by fire and their house left unto them desolate. That age-long fear is over and past; the old curse has exhausted itself and the ancient prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter: for

> First by the King, and then by the State,
> And thirdly by that which is thrice as great
> As these, and a thousand-fold stronger and higher,
> Has Baxendale Hall been made fuel of fire.

THE END.

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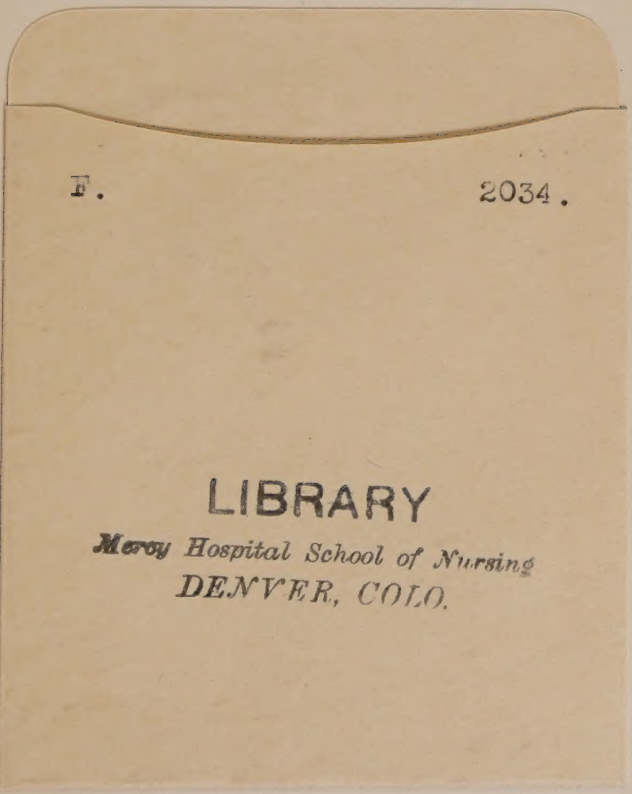
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